Dwarf Gold: The Sobriety of Hemery Skinner

by Vargavinter

Summary

"There was a time you trusted me without even knowing my name," Thorin said, his eyebrows knotted. "I wish you would try to do so again." He used to be righteous in a world full of liars and cowards. Perhaps that was a child's view, Hemery thought. Was Thorin as calculating and cold as all other masters?

Sequel to Dwarf Gold: The Cautiousness of Hanah Skinner. At twenty-one, Hemery returns to Erebor after five years in Minas Tirith. Has the mountain changed in her absence or has she?

Dear Thorin,

Kíli, Bofur, and Bifur arrived last week. They were very excited to join Dwalin and me in time for my birthday and share my last year in Minas Tirith. Last night, I showed them my favourite parts of the city, and they showed me how to drink a pint without stopping for breath. Suffice it to say, I have spent all day in my room emptying my stomach. It is now late, and I have just managed to drink some sweet tea.

Tirith is celebrating the New Year. There are festivities and fireworks. I see it all from my window, and I can hear the music when I go to sleep. Kíli and Bofur have come in very late three nights in a row, making the most of it, so to speak. I do not wish to know any details of their nocturnal adventures, though they are more than generous with their reply if I should, naively and unthinkingly, ask. Dwalin refuses to celebrate. He wonders why we should cheer their new year if they do not cheer ours. Logical as always. He is determined to dislike Tirith, as well as any friends or fellow students I introduce him to. I plan to celebrate the elvish New Year, just to tick him off. Even your own aversion to elves would be overlooked to enjoy the purple shade on his face at that.

However, he cannot deny he enjoys the food here. I do too; it is visible now that I do not train as often as I used to. He misses the mountain. I do too.

Kindly write and tell me how boring it is in Erebor, that nothing out of the ordinary occurs, and how aggravating you find everything. I am sure you find the mountain calm and peaceful now that I am gone.

Hemery

Dear Thorin,

I am preparing my final assignment. It takes up a lot of my time, even more than the hours I spend at the academy halls. I have not been able to accompany Dwalin on any hikes or fishing trips for some time. He says he does not mind, but I can tell it bothers him. He goes on his own instead, not even letting Bifur come along.

There was a gathering at the university in honour of the pupils who have completed their studies this year. All the students as well as our instructors were invited. It was mostly men present, which made me uncomfortable for some reason. At the social gatherings at Erebor there were always a lot of females. Here it was plenty of wine and silly boisterous talk, and I do not mean in a fun way like Kíli does it in the taverns.

I enjoy the studies immensely, and the lecturers are brilliant, but scholars are tedious and exhausting. They cannot abandon their impressing important voice for longer than it takes to swallow more wine. Now that I think about it, they are not so much different from you.

Will you answer and express your disagreement?

Hemery

Dear Thorin,
I cannot sleep. The moon lights the path of my pen as I write this. I present my finished work tomorrow. Sleep does not elude me because of some misplaced sense of uncertainty. I have done well here. My project is of great importance to me, though I doubt you will approve of it. The official approval of the academy is merely a dribble of wax on parchment for anyone outside this kingdom, but I shall keep it for myself if nothing else. To look at my name in golden letters and consider myself lucky for being able to make this journey.

After I have been evaluated, I will return to the mountain. I fear it is changed, as much as rock can change over the course of five years, or perhaps rather that I am changed, but it will be a relief to see the Lonely Mountain, nonetheless. Except the thanks I owe Fili for the gold he spent on my education, which will be a painful conversation.

Hanah tells me that she knows for a fact that you receive my letters. More than that she cannot say. I know you are always occupied with stately business and enjoy your own time in undisturbed solitude whenever your duty allows it, but I must send a question out into the starry night—for I believe it will not matter once I return, and I shall probably not receive any sort of response before then.

Thorin, why have you not written to me?

Hemery
The autumn sun hung low over the plains as Hemery, Dwalin, Kíli, their guards and other companions reached the Lonely Mountain. Almost three weeks had passed since they left Minas Tirith, but the trip had been enjoyable, if uneventful. They had followed a caravan of traders making their trip north to Esgaroth. Such a large group, between fifty and seventy people on horseback, were fairly safe on the big roads. They had often stopped in villages on the way, sleeping comfortably on feather beds at the inns and eating well in the taverns. But Hemery had barely taken the time to appreciate it. She was too keen on going home to the mountain.

They must have been spotted from Erebor because when they reached the first hall, everyone was waiting for them. Almost everyone.

Hemery noticed Hanah first. Next to her stood a girl almost half of Hanah's size—Híli—and Fíli next to his daughter. Lady Dis and Sethie had also come down to greet them.

Not bothering with polite greetings, Hanah rushed forward to embrace her little sister. Hemery, weighed down by some bags, dropped everything and met her with open arms. Hanah's grip was almost painfully tight. Hemery drew a deep breath. Her sister's scent was reminiscent of the one filling her room in Tirith, but it had been a pale imitation of the real thing. All her homesickness, how much she had missed Hanah, came rushing back after five years of suppression, bringing tears to her eyes.

Hemery was faintly aware of Fíli meeting his brother in a similar fashion a few feet away.

Hanah pulled back first, avoiding her eyes for a moment, and speaking with a low tremble.

"Let me take that," she said. Hanah reached out to help Hemery carry one of her bags.

"Oh, no, don't," Hem said. "I've been on a horse all day. I need to move a bit."

Fíli came up to them. "Leave it," he said, beckoning some servants with his hand. "Everything will be brought to your chambers."

"Sethie," Hem called, smiling widely at seeing the dwarf woman approach. Sethie did not hesitate in hugging Hemery after such a long time apart.

Behind Sethie, Híli stood quietly. Spotting her, Hemery gasped in feigned surprise.

"Is this the princess? An heir of Durin? The cleverest and strongest of them all?" She lowered herself on one knee as Híli came closer. The child was shy, but a smile tugged at her mouth.

Though Híli was about to see her ninth winter, Hem's eyes were almost level with hers as she kneeled. As a half-dwarf, Híli grew slowly.

"I'm not a complete stranger, surely. But you were awfully small when I saw you last. Not at all the elegant person standin' before me now," Hem said.

Híli straightened a bit at the praise.

"How old are you?" Hem asked.

The child looked up at her mother, but Hanah merely nodded in encouragement.
"How old are you?" Híli asked in return, making Hemery laugh.

"Fair enough," Hem said. "I know better than to expect somethin' for nothin'. I'm a very old woman. Almost as old as your ma," she said in faked horror.

Híli smiled shyly.

"I'm twice your age, plus five. How much is that?" Hem asked.

She watched as Híli looked down a moment, whispering quickly to herself and tried to hide that she counted on her fingers.

"One and twenty," Híli finally said softly.

"Very good," Hem said. "Your mother and father must be very proud of you."

Híli looked up at Hanah and Fíli before she met Hem's gaze once more, nodding. Hem felt her eyes burn again.

"I'm sorry I've been away for so long," Hem said low, only to Híli. She clasped her hands on top of her bent knee as she leaned forward. "It's so wonderful to see you again."

Not sure if Híli would appreciate a hug, and not wanting to force the child into a physical situation with a stranger, Hem reached out her hand for Híli to shake. She knew the girl had learnt this dwarven custom early.

Híli accepted Hemery's hand, bowing her head slightly as she curtsied. Hem's heart clenched.

"Oh, you never have to bow to me. You don't need to bow to anyone," Hem said. "Well, except maybe the king," she added.

Híli shook her head then. "Uncle Thorin told me not to."

Hemery's eyebrows rose. "Did he now?" she breathed out in surprise, but could not keep back a smile. "Well, I'll be damned," she laughed, not knowing what to say.

"Don't curse in front of my niece," Kíli said, appearing suddenly next to her. "That's my thing."

"Uncle Kíli," Híli exclaimed in excitement. He scooped Híli up in his arms without delay, tickling her and shifting her upside down, marching her over to Dwalin to say hello. Híli's delighted squeals faded as they moved away.

Hemery stood up, catching Fíli's eye. She gave him a thin smile, nodding a silent approval of his work as a father. He had done a fine job during Hemery's absence. It was clear Fíli did not expect any physical greeting, so he just met her eyes with a similar smile.

"Welcome home, Hem. You've been missed," he added with an unusual show of emotion. Of course, he did not say it was he who had missed her, but any low spirit in Hanah would surely affect him as well.

"Thank you."

He then frowned a bit. "Have you grown taller?" he asked.

Hemery's smile turned tight, and she slapped his chest with the gloves in her hand.
"You well know that I've not grown an inch since I left. Thank you for remindin' me," she said reproachfully.

Though Hanah and Hemery had never been tall, she was self-conscious of that one inch she was still shorter than Hanah.

Fíli laughed. "I daresay you've grown in temper."

She folded her arms in front of her. "I was about to thank you for all your help with my education, but I'm growin' less and less tempted to do so."

"Oh, you overestimate my efforts," Fíli said, as if she did indeed thank him. "I merely wrote some letters, threatened some dignitaries. It wasn't that difficult to find a place for you in Minas Tirith."

"But I'm sure it was not cheap," Hemery maintained.

Fíli shook his head. "I didn't pay for it. That was Dwalin. I only facilitated the transaction."

Confused, she looked at Dwalin standing a few yards away, speaking to Kíli, Híli, and Dis. His stance was stiff and uncomfortable, as usual when in the vicinity of Lady Dis.

"Why didn't he tell me?" Hemery asked.

"We thought he had," Hanah said, amused. "But you know how he is. He doesn't want to draw attention to his generosity. Would probably deny it if you asked." She laughed.

"Despite not being any blood relation of yours, you are his wee lass," Fíli established. "Always will be."

Hemery shook her head. Stubborn dwarves.

Speaking of which . . .

"Where's King Thorin?"

Fíli shrugged, apologetic. "I don't know. He knows you and Kíli were due back today, but I haven't seen him since yesterday."

Hemery thought it strange that King Thorin would not welcome Kíli, his own nephew, after a year away. And if Hem was also hurt that he did not want to see her, she did not say.

After dinner the following day, Hemery left her chambers with a book under her arm. The halls of the third floor were silent except for Hemery's footsteps and those of Bror, Hemery's guard, who walked beside her.

Hemery had spent the morning unpacking and resettling in her chambers which had stood empty while she was gone. Sethie had helped her, so every item was organized and all dirty laundry from the journey was washed before noon. Being commanded by Sethie to rest the remainder of the day, Hemery had mostly sat talking with Hanah as she worked all afternoon. After five years in Tirith, she had become used to spending a lot of time alone and longed now for some silence.

Suddenly, Bror stopped and turned. Hem looked around, searching for the reason. He took a step to the side, revealing Híli behind his large frame.

"What are you doin'?" Hem asked when she did not see Hanah, Sethie, or even a guard
accompanying her.

"Lookin' for you," Híli said.

"Does your ma know where you are?"

"With you." Híli pointed to where they came from. "I went through the wet room to see you and heard you leave."

"Oh." If Hanah knew Híli was with her, then she guessed it was fine. She looked to Bror, as if asking for a second opinion.

He just stared blankly back. Out of the two of them, he was supposed to be the security expert, but apparently he was no help. Hemery sighed.

"Well, come on then."

Híli ran to catch up as Hemery and Bror continued walking.

"Where are you going?" Híli asked.

Hemery smirked to herself as she noticed the girl's posh accent and clear articulation. She sounded more like a dwarven royal than a Blackwater lass.

"To the library. I have a book to put in its rightful place."

"What kind of book?"

"A book about dwarves."

"Isn't the library full of books about dwarves?"

Hemery smiled. "You'd think so, wouldn't you? But sadly, there aren't that many."

There was silence for a moment.

"Do you like to read?" Hemery asked.

"Sometimes."

"What do you like better?"

"I don't know. Melting things," Híli offered with an excited smile.

Hemery laughed.

"I melted one of mother's golden chain necklaces last week," Híli elaborated when she was rewarded with Hem's amusement. "She said I have to be careful, but I was careful. I used tongs and mother's apron and everything."

Hemery bit her the inside of her cheek to stop laughing. She should not encourage the lass.

"Bet your ma wasn't happy about that."

Híli looked down. "No," she admitted.

"Anythin' else you like doin'?"
"I like sketching, like mother does with coal on paper."

Hemery nodded in understanding. "I guess it's good to be diverse in one's skills."

"Exactly," Hfli agreed, beaming.

Hemery was not sure Hfli knew what that meant, but it did not matter. Hfli's smile needed no justification, she settled, basking in the girl's attention.

Hfli's smile had not faded when she suddenly asked, "Can you sing?"

"Can I sing?" Hem echoed in surprise, as if to clarify the question. "Yes, I can, but do you mean if I can sing well? No. Your mother is the singer. Your father and uncle would probably claim they're the singers of the family, but don't believe everythin' they say." She winked at Hfli who laughed in response.

"Mother only sings to me at night, or on special occasions. Will you sing to me?"

"Now?" Hemery glanced self-consciously at Bror. His stare was still blank, but his mouth twitched a little.

"I'll not sing on my own. I can teach you somethin', though, so we can sing together—or you can sing when you're by yourself."

"Yes, let's do that." Hfli jumped as she walked, clapping her hands. Hemery's embarrassment at singing in the corridor alone diminished at Hfli's joyful anticipation.

"Do you know . . . " Hemery went through her memory of songs she knew by heart, searching for something decent enough to teach a child. "Do you know 'The King and the Witch'?"

Hfli's eyes widened in awe. "No. What's it about? Sing it, please," she pleaded, clasping her hands.

"Alright. It's one of those where every other line repeats itself, so when I tell you, you can join in."

Hemery cleared her throat.

"The king of high graces went to the wood – Coming upon the witch with the hood – We weave our fates still – After the gods' will

Can you tell how horses stand in my stable? – And how many of them are able – We weave our fates still – After the gods' will

A dozen, Your Highness, but ten are poor – All this I can tell you and more – We weave our fates still – After the gods' will

Can you say how long I'll live? – And how much my Queen may give – We weave our fates still – After the gods' will

None but your dog will miss you, Sire – And nothing stirs your Queen but ire – We weave our fates still – After the gods' will

You're a wise woman, I can tell – And not just from your spell – We weave our fates still – After the gods' will

The king grazed the pagan's chin – Said, I know to touch you is a sin – We weave our fates still – After the gods' will"
But I wish you were my love – High in my tower above – We weave our fates still – After the gods' will

I'll take no king to my bed – She said, and the hood she shed – We weave our fates still – After the gods' will

Thy heart is cold – Though your touch is bold – We weave our fates still – After the gods' will

I fear you'll not survive this wood – Said the lady with the hood . . ."

Bror waited outside as Hemery pushed open the heavy door to the library. She stopped singing when they crossed the threshold.

"We'll finish later," Hemery said.

"Why can't we sing in here?" Híli asked. "You'll not survive this wood," she announced dramatically, worthy of any theatre stage in Tirith.

Hemery winced as the Híli's words travelled down the length of the long, dark room like the howling of a ghoul. "Shhh," she hissed.

"It sounds much stronger in here," Híli observed, delighted.

"Libraries are made for readin'," Hem explained in a soft voice to stop any echo. "Not even speakin' is supposed to be heard in here."

A few lanterns burned as well as the great fireplace in the middle of the room. Hemery could barely make out the words on the spines of the books and was about to reach for a lantern when Híli suddenly ran to the fireplace.

"Uncle Thorin," she called out.

Hemery froze, trying to focus on the shape by the fire through the gloom.

"Now there are two of you," a deep, familiar voice rumbled. "Girls lacking all decorum, desecrating these ancient halls."

When he reached out an arm to her, Híli completely ignored the insult and climbed onto Thorin's chair, settling comfortably on his knee.

Hemery's heart suddenly beat faster. He had just surprised her, she gathered. That was all. And perhaps some nerves played a part since she had not heard from him in years and still did not know why.

Slowly, Hemery approached the fireplace. Not until she was halfway did she see him well enough to make out his face. Híli must have had ten times better sight than she. At this moment, however, Hemery almost wished she was blind. Thorin only glanced at her indifferently before turning back to Híli on his lap.

"I'm not surprised," he drawled. "I knew you would reappear and disturb me eventually."

Hemery did not know if he spoke to her or to Híli, but answered anyway. "And I'm not surprised to find you here. Hidin' as usual." His nonchalance triggered a streak of impertinence in her.

"There's a difference between hiding and owning one's privacy. No one else bothers me here. No one but you, it seems."
Again, she was not sure to whom he spoke.

"What would I have to hide from?" he continued.

"I don't know," she replied. She only ever said things like that to provoke him. "I was just wonderin' why you didn't greet Kili yesterday? You've not seen him for such a long time," she answered truthfully, but could not deny it also related to her.

"Kili is my nephew. When he returns, whether it is from duties or leisurely excursions, he will come to me. I wait on no one," he said with finality.

Hemery felt her cheeks heat. But she should not be embarrassed. It was not as if she asked him to personally greet her.

"Of course, Your Highness." Hemery pursed her lips, not knowing what to say.

Silence stretched while Hili looked between her aunt and great uncle, curiously.

"I trust you are in good health," Thorin said at long last.

"Yes, Sire." Hemery dipped her chin once in a respectful nod. "And you?"

"Yes, yes. Very well," he replied impatiently, waving away the question. A smile tugged on Hemery's lips. The king had never been fond of conventions and pleasantries, but he knew they must be adhered to.

For some reason, Hemery found herself standing very straight with her shoulders pulled back like Dwalin always told her. She had to remind herself she need not care what Thorin thought of her posture or her manners. She tried to stand relaxed and normal, but felt uncomfortable in her own skin. Finally, she folded her arms around the book in her hands.

"We came to leave Aunt Hemery's book here," Hili said.

"Oh?" Thorin voiced a vague interest. "Is it a volume borrowed these five years Miss Hemery has been away?" he asked.

"No," Hemery said, tired of being addressed sideways. "It has never been a part of this library. But . . . " she hesitated. "I hope you'll allow it to a place here from now on."

Thorin motioned for Hili to fetch it. She jumped down from his lap, ran the four steps to Hemery, received the book and ran back to Thorin.

He leafed through a few pages.

"From where does it come?" he asked.

Hemery's mouth went dry.

"I wrote it."

His gaze shot up to hers with raised eyebrows. In surprise or disapproval was impossible to tell in this light.

"I've always found that there was not enough information about the culture of this city," she explained. "Not just the language, but the stories, songs, and traditions. It's a part of the legacy of your people. It belongs here," she finished, uncertain.
Thorin stared at her a moment, then snapped the book shut and handed it back to Híli who held onto it. He pointed to the shelves on his right, detached.

"I'm sure you can find room for it."

Híli went to do just that. Hemery did not know what Híli would view as a good place, but the disappointment she felt at Thorin's dismissal overshadowed any concern about alphabetical order and topic systems.

She followed Híli dumbly with her eyes. Would the book be another dusty tome on the shelves no one touched? She sighed mournfully.

Thorin's voice roused her.

"What did you do to your hair?" he asked, frowning now.

"What?" Confused, Hem raised her hands to the knot at the back of her head, but nothing seemed amiss.

"You never used to wear it like that," he said.

When Hemery was younger, she used to braid her hair in a simple plait. But when she moved to Minas Tirith, she wanted to look more like the women there. Because of her height, people always assumed she was younger than her years, so, to look more grown up, she had taken to wearing her hair like they did. After a while, she stopped thinking about it.

"Well, I'm not a child anymore," she said.

"No Ereborean would wear it that way," he claimed stubbornly.

She had forgotten how particular dwarves were about hair. Hemery would have found it amusing if the statement had not been so rude.

"I'm not a dwarf either. Anyway, I wear my hair however I like. And I do not require your opinion on the subject . . . Your Highness," she added to soften her impudence.

His gaze continued to pierce her, as if he knew there was more to her reasoning than she let on.

Híli returned. It was clear in the way she hurried back and forth that Híli had little interest in the library as such, but much more curiosity towards her aunt and uncle and what they were talking about.

"There was somethin' I meant to ask you, Sire," Hemery said.

"A request on your first day back? This ought to be note worthy. Should we not schedule an official audience for this?" Thorin teased with a dry smile.

Hemery stood firm, determined to not be intimidated by his manners now that she had brought it up.

"I'd like your permission to put forward a suggestion to the schoolmasters about some expansions of Erebor's education structure. I think they should include more readings in the curriculum. And
make education available to all citizens of all ages and races."

Thorin sighed, but did not say no straight away which was a good sign.

"As much as I admire your idealism, a reformation of the magnitude you speak would not be easy. Or cheap."

"I know—"

"Nor would it be welcome," he went on. "Change in this mountain is like chipping away at diamonds with a teaspoon."

Hemery kept her chin high. "I would like to try," she said.

Thorin looked at her a moment before letting out a short huff, the corner of his mouth pulling upward a fraction.

"You do not waste time, Miss Skinner."

"Not when it's this important," she agreed.

"Though you have wasted plenty of time in here when you should have been working. Driving your sister half mad, disappearing for hours at a time."

Hemery smiled, remembering well how she had spent her time running between Hanah's workshop and the library. Sometimes forgetting all time and existence so Hanah had to come look for her late at night, berating her all the way to bed. She scrunched her nose at her younger self who had been so easily lured into the world of ink on paper.

"You remember that?" she asked, surprised he would have taken notice of her penalties.

"Seems like only yesterday," he said, looking away.

There was silence again. Híli had taken up the poker from the fireplace and pushed the burning logs around.

"Your efforts have my blessing," Thorin said. "I'm sure my sister would be interested as well. Speak to her—she'll enforce your venture."

Hemery stared. "You don't want to hear the details? I have it all planned out, about material and facilities—"

"I should hope so," he interrupted. "Those five years away ought not have been in vain, or your family has spent a pretty sum on a tedious holiday. I'm confident you will produce a reasonable proposal."

Not until that moment did Hemery realise how much she had feared he would say no. Now, her fear almost seemed silly. Thorin was not a fool. He knew that improving literacy would benefit the whole kingdom in the long run. And if he thought she had no chance to succeed, he would have said so.

Calm and confidence filled her, and she bowed her head with a smile.

"Gratitude. I appreciate your support."

Thorin brushed off her words. "As if you would cease your efforts had I refused? You don't need
my permission, but you have it. So there."

Hemery said nothing. He was probably right. She would have worked harder to prove her point.

With her errand done and their discussion concluded, Hemery and Híli should leave. In the past, whenever she happened to meet Thorin in the library, she could mostly ignore him and go about her business, searching the shelves for new and interesting finds. Now, she felt bound by propriety and a compulsion to not disturb Thorin that she had never experienced before.

Hemery looked at her niece. "We should go back, Híli."

"Already?"

Hemery held out a hand for her.

"I'll teach you the rest of the song. Come on."

"Good bye, Uncle Thorin." Híli kissed his cheek before going to Hemery and taking her hand.

"Good night," Hemery said. "Your Highness," she added before turning away.

Thorin said nothing, but Hemery did not dare look back.
Unexpected Commands

"But before your mother could plunge the sword through the demon's heart, she shrivelled and shrank, transformin' into a serpent, slitherin' swiftly into the freezin' waters, never to be seen again," Hemery finished her story in a dramatic whisper to a wide-eyed Híli.

"Don't scare the poor lass," Sethie admonished with a quirk to her lips, dumping another load of laundry in a tub of hot water.

Hemery straightened with an innocent look, continuing to iron her petticoats. "It's Mahal's honest truth," she said, shaking her head and pursing thin lips in sober confirmation. "That's why they call it the Snake Fall."

"No, it isn't," Sethie protested. "It's because of the wormwood growing on the riverbank."

"That's what they want you to think." Hemery poked Híli's nose playfully.

Híli was familiar enough with Hemery's judgement to know that they meant Híli's family on her father's side—the Durins.

"What would people do if they knew such a beast dwelled in the serene sweet-water springs of their home?" Hemery challenged.

"They'd be afraid?" Híli asked.

"Correct. They'd be very afraid. In the last ten years that the serpent's been loose, who knows how large it has grown? Comin' and goin' at will through our creeks and rivers, impossible to catch, tormentin' us with its very existence."

The story was an imaginative exaggeration of what had happened, but Hemery felt its truth resonate in her heart.

"Always, she reminds us of where we come from and where our true family is. Do you know what family is, Híli?"

Híli looked up from the dry linens she was folding. "Father says I'm his blood. Family is to have the same blood."

Hemery shook her head, authoritative. "Family are the ones who forgive our mistakes when we show remorse and shelter us when no one else will. The ones who teach us skills of life and let us to grow."

She thought about Hanah, but also about Dwalin. He was not Hemery and Hanah's blood, but he was as much family as their own father had been. Even Fíli, she had to admit, was part of her family. She may not like him very much, but she cared for his well fare like a sister for her brother.

"She also reminds us that our security comes with a price, and we must fight to keep it." Hemery's voice turned soft but firm. "Not to mention that a sound education in sword fightin' is crucial for all women."

"That's enough morality tales for one morning," Sethie said, wiping her hands on her apron. "Miss Híli, you'd better go up to eat with your mother so you're fit for your session with Dwalin this afternoon."
Hemery smiled. "You'll need it." She opened her arms to receive Híli's hug before the girl left, joined by her guard in the corridor outside.

"Miss Hanah will not be pleased if you keep filling that girl's head with nightmares," Sethie warned with a smile. Hemery was not bothered in the least.

"That girl hangs on my word like a bat on a cave ceiling," she replied proudly. "I'll teach her everythin' I know."

"Everything, eh?" Sethie mocked. "Lucky girl."

Hemery threw a wet towel at the maid's head, earning a loud cackling laugh in return as Sethie caught it.

There was a knock on the open door. Hemery turned to see Balin in the opening to the laundry room.

"Miss Skinner," he expressed formally. He was unusually sombre. "You are summoned to court."

Hemery blanched, immediately thinking of the book she presented to Thorin a few weeks ago. She head feared he would see it as crossing the boundary between their cultures. Perhaps he disapproved. Perhaps he hated it. Perhaps he would punish her for her revealing secrets about dwarves for the world to see.

She took a deep breath. She would not assume the worst before hearing what it was about.

"Is somethin' wrong?" she asked calmly.

Balin shook his head with a tense smile. "Nothin' to worry about. Thorin wants you and yer sister's presence for a special hearing. You are to be witnesses and . . . advisors if need be."

He drummed his fingertips on his belt restlessly. It may not have anything to do with her, but he was clearly uneasy.

"Very well," Hem agreed.

She took off her apron and rolled down the long sleeves of her dress, buttoning them at the wrists. The dress was simple and high-necked with only a slight intake at the waist—much like a chambermaid's, except for the dark red colour. Hemery still found it strange how the dress incited more respect than her old tunic and trousers had ever done. Fortunately, the dress was more comfortable.

Sethie tucked back a few wisps of hair into Hemery's knot before letting her join Balin and Bror in the corridor.

"What happened?" Hemery asked as they moved through the halls down to the throne room.

"Border patrol came upon a band of men in the forest to the east. The men drew arms, but were quickly overtaken and seized."

Hemery found this strange. "Why were they arrested?"

"No men residin' in the area would pull swords against dwarven soldiers." He shook his head. "No. We suspect they have come from Blackwater."

Hemery felt like she was sinking, though her feet kept walking, as if separate from her body.
"What for?"

"We don't know. We are goin' to question them now. That's why we want ye there. Yer knowledge of Blackwater might be valuable."

They entered the big hall through a side door. There were no people on the floor except for a row of guards along each wall. On the platform, the thrones were empty. The king and the princes were absent; not even Dis lingered in the gallery. Instead, Balin moved to stand in front of the thrones next to the dwarves Hemery recognized as part of the king's personal guard—Rál, Steig, and Vannur.

Hanah and Fíli appeared by Hemery's side. The older sister took a deep breath.

"This will be interestin'," was all Hanah said.

"Shouldn't Thorin be here?" Hemery asked.

"We don't want our visitors too close," Fíli replied. "If they are what we fear, then we cannot risk them coming into contact with any of us."

"You're here," Hem noted.

"I'm not about to put my—" he stopped himself. "Put Hanah in harms way."

Had he been about to call Hanah his wife? Hemery smirked.

"Thorin's not happy, but there's little he can do," Hanah said, looking up. "The council will not let him within the strangers' reach."

Hemery followed her gaze to the balcony. A group of people were gathered along the railing. She spotted Thorin's and Kíli's dark hair among them. They reminded her of children spying overtly from behind a tree log.

"Where's Híli?" Hem asked.

"Sethie and Nuhir took her to see Dwalin until supper," said Hanah.

Footsteps echoed on the stone. Hemery and everyone one else in the hall turned their focus to the man being ushered forward by four guards.

He was taller than his captors, but looked thoroughly defeated. He walked with slumped shoulders though his hands were untied. His ragged clothes stained dark by damp and dirt increased the sense of dejection. The man looked utterly alone. Hemery almost felt sorry for him.

"One man?" Hemery asked her companions in a whisper.

"The leader," Fíli answered. "He was the first of the five who ordered them to drop their weapons when the soldiers had them cornered. We want the chance to interrogate each individually should the first interaction fail."

The man was brought to a stop twenty feet from Balin.

"I am Balin son of Fundin," he said in a clear, commanding voice travelling the length of the room. "I speak for Thorin son of Thrain son of Thror, King Under the Mountain."

Silence dominated the room, everyone waiting for Balin's instructions.
"Who are you, and why did you attack the king's soldiers?"

"We are hunters—just tryin' to find game to smoke before the frost comes," the man replied.

Hanah turned to whisper to Fíli. "He's from east of Blackwater, but not by much. You can hear it in the a's."

Fíli nodded in agreement.

"What is yer name?" Balin demanded.

The man hesitated almost imperceptibly. "Tarren Low."

"Yer deception is an insult, Mister Low," came Balin's bold accusation. "Ye had no bows, no cargo, no trophies, not even a copper. Clearly, ye're not hunters. And ye're decidedly not merchants nor even thieves."

Tarren Low frowned, but remained silent.

"Five of ye we found, yet six horses grazed in the glade. Six bedrolls. Six cloaks. Where's yer sixth companion?"

"There is no sixth," Tarren Low answered.

These were the first words he spoke while meeting Balin's eyes, which made Hemery believe they were the first sincere words spoken.

"You were lookin' for someone," Hem said as soon as the idea struck her.

Tarren snapped his eyes to her, apprehensive, but said nothing. Balin noticed this.

"Is that true?" he asked, eyes narrowing at Tarren. "Ye don't deny it."

Tarren looked down, refusing to answer.

"Who is it ye seek? Friend or foe?" Balin continued. "Why enter this kingdom in yer pursuit? Is the person to be valued—or feared? Speak."

Balin was running out of steam. If the questions remained unanswered, Hem feared he would resort to threats.

"If you brought a horse for this individual," she speculated, trying to trigger some reaction, some tell, from Tarren, "and a bedroll, and warm clothes, you prioritize their comfort. Comfort equal to your own."

She looked at Balin in silent permission. He nodded shallowly in assurance. Relieved, Hemery took a new breath.

"You seek someone whom you wish to treat well. Someone important, otherwise you'd not risk comin' this close to Erebor." This was easy enough to deduce. Come on, Tarren—show us a sign. Say something, she wished.

Tarren only stared at the stone floor with shoulders slumped, dejected.

Hemery stepped down from the platform, stopping at his level.
"But you're not sure you'll even find this person," she guessed. "That's why you answered in denial about the sixth horse. And you're reluctant to say who because we might find them before you."

Tarren raised his head as if to glare at her, but stopped himself.

*There*, Hemery thought in triumph. A reaction.

She shared a look with Balin. It was very likely she was right in her assumptions. Now they had something to go on, somewhere to start their own search if Tarren would not talk.

"Apart from general hostility and defiance toward the king's soldiers, you have committed no crime," said Fíli in a benevolent voice. "But you must see why we are interested in your business here."

Fíli was a good mediator, Hemery knew. His friendly manners often assured people where they previously were uncertain.

"Sadly," he continued, apologetic, "due to Erebor's history with the lord of Blackwater, every visitor from the east is forced to suffer scrutiny. Especially those who employ such secrecy. If you answer our questions truthfully and convince us you mean no harm, I see no reason why we should not let you go."

"And if we refuse?" Tarren Low challenged.

"In that case," Balin's stern voice contrasted, "the king has no qualms about detaining ye until ye do."

Hemery looked at Balin. Could he do that? Technically, Tarren Low and his companions had done nothing wrong. Fíli had just said as much. Thorin would not lock them up without a cause, surely?

Tarren seemed to be of a similar opinion.

"You have no right to keep us here," he said, voice raised, taking a step forward.

Immediately, Bror's armoured back appeared in front of Hemery, his axe pointing menacingly at Tarren's chest, forcing him back. Shocked, more from Bror's sudden reaction than fear of Tarren, Hemery retreated to her place beside Hanah and Fíli. Hanah put her arm around her shoulders.

"I'll ask ye one more time," Balin said as the room began to hum with soldiers readying to take Tarren Low down if he so much as breathed in a threatening way.

"It's true then—King Thorin is a tyrant just like all masters," Tarren spat.

Hanah gasped at the insult in shocked fear of what might happen to Mister Low due to his strong language. Hemery in turn winced. He really should no better than to call Thorin a tyrant, she thought.

Balin sighed, knowing communication was dead. "Take him away," he told the guards.

"This is outrageous. You have no right!" Tarren Low's protests echoed as he was removed from the hall.

Hemery, Hanah, and Fíli followed Balin to a room behind the thrones. Thorin and Kíli were already there, waiting.

"He hails from Blackwater," Fíli stated. "That much we know. What we don't know is whether or
"They're not likely to talk either," Balin predicted. "If and when Brage finds out we are holding them, he'll rile up every man within a hundred miles to protest their arrests. And if Brage has not charged them with some mission, then we're incarcerating innocent men," he finished gravely.

"They're hardly innocent," Thorin grumbled. "No one wears such heavy weaponry unless they plan to use it."

"But did you see his clothes?" Hanah asked. "He's a ranger, not a mercenary."

"They attacked my men," Thorin argued methodically, undeterred.

"Considerin' how dwarves are talked about in Blackwater, it's not surprisin'," Hanah explained.

"You heard him," Fíli said to Thorin, agreeing with Hanah. "They think dwarves are the spawn of evil. There's a chance, however small, they honestly thought they were defending themselves."

"Back to the crucial question, please," Kíli requested. "We need to know why they're here. His refusal to talk says they're definitely hiding something. I think Hem's right—they're looking for someone."

"Perhaps we should find this elusive person on behalf of our guests?" Fíli offered.

Thorin thought a moment before coming to a decision. "Triple the patrols on the border," he told Fíli and Kíli. "If there's someone on my mountain who's not supposed to be here, I want to know."

Thorin held a hard, precise tone Hemery had never heard before. He turned to Balin. "Continue interrogations until you learn their objective. Alternate between them. Of the five, there must be one who fears another will talk before they do. Or at least dislikes rock and darkness enough to tell us whatever we want to know in order to be let out."

Hanah left first. Hemery could tell by her hard heels on the stone that she did not agree with Thorin's plan, but was not going to argue with him. Balin, Fíli, and Kíli stayed to discuss specifics of patrol duty. Thorin was about to leave when Hemery caught up with him outside the room.

The soldiers had left the throne room; only their own personal guards remained.

"Sire," Hemery said, making him pause. "You'll leave the men in the cells? Without cause?"

"You think I don't have enough cause?" Thorin raised his voice, clearly not happy with being questioned. "Give them a few days without light or heat—we'll find their true purpose here."


"Ten years of uncertainty while Fíli's attempted assassination goes unpunished. That is torture," Thorin growled. He pinned her with his steel stare.

"You cannot punish these men for somethin' you cannot prove," Hemery almost whispered, not daring to speak louder.

"A few days of discomfort are trivial. I take the risk gladly if it provides ultimate certainty."

"But—" Hem did not know what to say. She also wanted justice for Fíli, though she had no right to claim it more than Thorin. But the prize could not be the suffering of others. It would be a gross
moral transgression, impossible to recover from—impossible to forgive for those who endured it.

"But it's wrong," she managed weakly.

Thorin looked away. He turned as if to leave, but hesitated. His coat grazed the floor as he shifted where he stood. Hemery noticed it was the same coat he used to wear before she left—the one Hanah and their father had made. It was in good shape. He must have had Hanah maintain it for him several times for it to hold together so well and stay vivid in the black leather and white fur.

Hemery used to be proud knowing the king wore her sister's work. He used to be dependable and righteous in a world full of liars and cowards. But perhaps that was a child's view. Perhaps she had not been allowed to see the real king.

She felt torn. Were Tarren Low's words true? Was Thorin as vengeful and cold as Lady Brage?

Thorin glanced at her over his shoulder. "It will be over soon," he finally said before walking away.
Dinner that night was a quiet affair. With Ælvi present, the subject of the visitors was avoided, but Hemery's and Hanah's eyes met over the table a few times—dissatisfied and dejected. When they had time to speak later that evening, it was rushed and without hope.

"Ælvi's been busy all afternoon, but I'll talk to him now," Hanah said. "Hopefully, he can try to change Thorin's mind tomorrow."

Such was the nature of Hanah's trust in Ælvi that there was no doubt in her mind that Ælvi shared her thoughts. Hemery wished she could be as sure.

Sitting in her chambers late that night, Hemery noticed the full moon outside. It moved in waves as she approached the uneven glass window, as if it was merely a reflection on a black lake.

It was cold out. Frost was coming. The cells were placed deep in the mountain, but the efficient ventilation would make short work of the long tunnels, making it equally cold in the cells as it was in a damp, drafty, shallow cave.

Suddenly, Hemery threw on a cloak over her dress and grabbed a lantern from a table.

Whatever hot-blooded, indignant attitude Low might have been able to show in the afternoon would surely be lukewarm by now. The men would be cold and hungry. Surely, they would be more inclined to find a solution to their problem than Tarren had been earlier. It would not hurt, either, to initiate a conversation without the audience of dwarven soldiers.

Hemery decided she would find out. Her night guard, Raín, followed dutifully and silently when she left her chambers heading for the lower levels, but stopped when they reached the door leading down to the cells. Eight soldiers in full gear guarded the doors. They were still like statues, but Hem knew they were ever watchful and alert.

"What?" Hem asked when the dwarf would not continue.

"None is to enter or exit the cellblock without explicit permission from the royal family or the head of the council," Raín replied.

Raín's voice was different than Hemery would have expected. She had not spent much time in Raín's company since Hem rarely ventured out at night, and Raín had only been assigned to Hemery's guard after her return to Erebor.

Raín's voice was a pleasant alto with a tinge of Dwalin's dialect. The uniform hid most of any gender-specific features. Even the helmet sat close to the skin and covered so much of the cheeks that it was an easy fact for Hemery to miss. She was not as obsessive over beards as the other mountain dwellers.

Hemery's eyebrows shot up. "You're a woman," she pointed out before she could stop herself. Some of the sentries snickered at the surprised statement. Hemery rounded on them.

"Excuse me," she sneered. "Wasn't talkin' to you."

She turned back to Raín. "Is this the only way in?"

Raín appeared as stoic as ever, but her eyes shifted rapidly.
"No, Miss. But the other entries are guarded as well."

"What would happen if I tried to go in?"

"The sentries would . . . stop you?" Raín seemed uneasy about the line of questioning, as if she believed it to be a test.

Hemery reached out to grab the door handle. The sentries closed the ranks, leaving no room to touch the door at all.

"And if I tried really hard?" Hemery asked, moving to stand nose to nose with the nearest guard, staring him down. At least she thought it was a he.

"With all due respect, Miss," Raín said. "They'd arrest ye."

"And put me in a cell in there?" Hemery pointed beyond the door the sentries were currently blocking.

Raín frowned. "I won't presume to know what it is ye want in the dungeons, Miss—"

Hemery almost snorted. The whole mountain was a dungeon.

"—But I doubt ye'll achieve anything locked in there."

Hemery put her hands on her hips, staring at the door a moment. Then she turned back to Raín.

"I guess I'll get permission, then," she said, walking back up the stairs. Raín followed.

"Do you know what time it is?" Kíli groaned through a crack in his door.

Hemery smiled indulgingly. "It'd be so easy to let you go back to your warm feather bed. You probably had a nice cup of wine in front of the fire before, didn't you? A good year, I bet, with a spicy taste from an oak barrel to heat your belly before a long night's sleep?" Her smile dropped. "Do you know how cold it is in the dungeons? You'll come with me to the cellblock, right now, and clear up this mess your uncle made."

"How is this my problem? Why aren't you knocking on his door?"

Hemery glared at him. "Take some bloody responsibility, Prince Kíli," she hissed. She glanced up and down the corridor to make sure no one overheard her. Raín and Kíli's guards stood a few yards away, pretending not to take notice of every word.

"He doesn't care about some Blackwater men catchin' their death in his cells," Hem went on. "He's takin' his vengeance out on them, though you and I both know he can't prove they've done anythin' wrong. But if we go down there right now, they might tell us the real reason they're here, and we can let them go before Thorin commits a crime against them."

Kíli leaned his forehead on the doorframe tiredly.

"You know I'm right," Hem cajoled insistently.

With a deep sigh, Kíli joined her in the corridor, putting on a coat over his white shirt and leather trousers which he clearly pulled on just before opening the door.

"Why don't you bother my brother with this?"
Because Kíli was more likely to agree and do as she asked.

"Your rooms were closest," Hem said, shrugging.

Kíli shook his head. "I'm so underappreciated."

"Sob later," Hem said impatiently quickening her pace down the stairs. "Come on."

Doors opened automatically, as if proudly displaying the newly oiled hinges, for Prince Kíli, Hemery, Raín, and Kíli's four guards. The sentries respectfully stepped out of the way when they approached, readily producing keys and holding doors.

Most of the cells were empty, but Kíli seemed to know what they were looking for, guiding them further down. It was colder in the lower levels than Hemery thought. Water dripped from the ceiling and her breath came out as steam. At least, what little she saw of it in the dim light of the lanterns they brought. Kíli stopped by a wall of bars.

Tarren Low's cell.

"Mister Low?" Hemery said, raising her lantern to light the cell.

He sat on a bench in the corner. He held up a hand to shield his eyes from the lantern. His eyes hurt when exposed to light after only one evening spent in blackness.

"You don't know me," she began. "My name is Hemery Skinner."

Tarren's eyes flickered. From recognition or adjusting to the light, she was not sure.

"I hate to see you remain in this cell. No one should have to spend time down here. I'm here to implore you to communicate. It's your best chance of gettin' out."

"I'm not tellin' you anythin'," Tarren replied simply.

"See?" Kíli spoke under his breath to Hem, eager to conclude their business and leave. "What do you expect from Blackwater trash?"

She grit her teeth, glaring at him. "I'm Blackwater trash," she argued, struggling to keep her voice down. "You did your part. Now, shut up," she hissed crossly, pushing a fingertip hard into his chest. Then she turned back to Tarren.

"Why won't you speak?" she asked politely. "If you searched for someone dear to you, we could help you find them. It's a simple request."

"You can't help me. I wish you could, m'lady, but you can't."

Hemery thought about his words. How could someone be so forsaken? What could have happened to Tarren Low to make him lose hope?

She shared a look with Kíli who only frowned back, shrugging.

"I'm from Blackwater as well," Hem told Tarren. "About ten years ago, my sister and I were forced to leave because we made business with dwarves. Lady Brage locked my sister up in a room much like this one. They almost killed her before we were lucky enough to escape. Their cells were not as heavily guarded as these."
Tarren turned to stare into nothing.

"The Brages have done terrible things, as I'm sure you know," she continued. "If you came here on their orders—please, tell us."

He still said nothing, but Hemery could see his clenched fists. Something she said resonated in him.

"Two kinds of people work for Brage—those who are paid and those who are extorted. Somehow I doubt you are in their employ by choice. If you were a mercenary, you'd have offered us information in exchange for gold. You know the dwarves have plenty. But you didn't because your predicament would remain. Whether you oblige us in our requests or not, it doesn't matter, because we're not your problem—they are."

"As I said," Tarren slowly lifted his eyes to hers. "You can't help."

"Perhaps we can," Hemery said, optimistic. "The landlords have run Blackwater long enough, and Erebor is the only power in the area that can overthrow them, create a new government on the ridge. Brage has no friends, no allies. Whatever they are threatenin' you with, we can help."

"They are in control of everythin'," Tarren said, finally confirming her train of thought. He might have been a full-grown man with children, but he looked very young at that moment, an uncertainty lacing his face. "Things will only get worse if we resist."

"How much worse? Look around you," Kíli challenged, snorting without amusement. "Will they lock you up in a cold cell? Will they kill you? Kill your family?"

Tarren tore his eyes away, supporting his head in his hands.

"Will you kill for Brage? Will you kill someone else's family in order to keep your own safe?" Hemery pushed, raising her lantern higher. She felt him retreat, and she needed to keep him engaged. "Look at me," she commanded, banging the metal edge of the lantern against the bars to catch his attention.

Tarren looked up. She tilted her chin, displaying her throat to him.

"They sent a woman here to kill one of the princes. They held her brother hostage to make sure she did what they asked. She failed in her mission, but she did this to me."

He got up from the bench and approached the bars. He narrowed his eyes as he tried to focus what little sight he possessed on the long, white scar on her neck.

"I was twelve years old," Hemery said.

"What happened to her?" he asked, wary.

"She's dead. I don't know what happened to her brother."

Tarren put his hands on the bars, gripping them until his knuckles whitened.

Hemery chanced a look at Kíli. The dwarf prince stood in the same place as before, seemingly not daring to speak, anticipation clear in his eyes. She was thinking the same thing.

At any moment, Tarren might actually tell them something important.

"Do you promise the Brages will pay for their crimes?" he asked, staring at them through the bars.
Hemery bit her lip in indecision. Could she promise something like that?

"They tried to murder my brother," Kíli said with a grave expression. "We promise to do all we can to bring them to justice."

Tarren stared at him a moment, seemingly weighing Kíli's words.

"They want their daughter," he said finally.

What was he talking about?

"Who?" Hem asked confused.

"The landlords. Their daughter is missin'."

"But—" Hem began, "they don't have any children. Their sons died thirty years ago."

"Apparently, that's why they kept her a secret. Lady Brage wanted to keep her safe by keeping her indoors at all times. But in the end, the girl wanted out—so she ran away. I had no idea myself until they sent us out to look for her."

"How do we know you're telling the truth?" Kíli asked.

Tarren sighed. "You don't, but if you find a nineteen year old girl runnin' around in the forest, you'll have leverage against Brage."

Kíli looked as giddy as Hemery felt when they left Tarren's cell.

"Out of all possible explanations," he said, "I would never have guessed they were sent to fetch home a runaway."

"I'm just glad they're not here to kill anyone," Hemery said, feeling her heart race after the break through with Tarren.

"Let's hope he's telling the truth."

"Let's hope we find that girl."

"Or the mountainside will be crawling with Blackwater rangers soon," Kíli complemented. "The mad harpy might burn the forest down looking for her."

They fell into a fit of nervous giggles as they moved towards the warm light of torches in the next corridor. A shadow blocked their view.

"What in the faery forest do ye think ye're doing?" Balin's voice asked.

"Mister Balin," Kíli exclaimed. "What are you doing here? It's the middle of the night."

"I could ask you the same thing, lad. They summoned me the moment ye entered the cellblock."

"We did it," Kíli said, smiling. "We know why they're here—"

Balin closed his eyes briefly, holding up a hand to stop him. "Aye, I heard."

"You heard?" Hemery echoed. How long had he been down here?
"Ingenious, I must say," he commented. "But very risky. Ye don't know how lucky ye are, both of ye."

"It's not like I divulged any state secrets," Hemery said, shaking her head in bewilderment.

Balin sighed patiently. "No, but if Mister Low had been an assassin, ye placed one of the princes within his reach—we were trying to avoid."

Hemery flushed and looked down.

"Everything went fine. We were very careful," Kíli assured him.

"Tell that to yer uncle," Balin said meaningfully.

Kíli sobered quickly. "He's here?" he asked carefully, as if fearing Thorin was just around the corner.

"On his way," Balin replied.

"Right. Of course." Kíli turned to Hemery, frowning. "You should return to your rooms."

"This was my idea," she said. "I should take responsibility for it."

Kíli smiled crookedly. "I know, but that is not what's about to happen. You'll have your chance to explain yourself to Thorin, but not now."

"But I have to—"

"No, you really don't," Kíli insisted, as if knowing exactly what she was going to say. "You talked me into it, but you did not twist my arm, little sister. I will bear it, and we'll talk tomorrow. Now go."

Kíli beckoned Raín to take her back. Frowning, Hemery obliged, walking with Raín to her rooms. Hem would have liked a chance to tell Thorin he was most likely wrong about Tarren and his men. She also knew he would be angry that they initiated a dialogue with Tarren without his or Balin's awareness. She realised now, too late, why it had been risky. The air of innocence she had latched onto could have been a ruse.

The triumph of getting answers from Tarren faded in the wake of embarrassment. She should have waited until the morning, talked to Fíli and agreed on some form of strategy to engage Tarren and then maybe—hopefully— have the men moved to better sleeping quarters. But even one night in that place was one too many in her estimation.

The truth was she had been angry with Thorin. Disappointed. She had wanted to defy him, to prove him wrong. And now Kíli would pay for her childishness.

Hemery could not sleep. She had tried, but only tossed and turned, imagining Thorin's disapproval of her behaviour—the sound of his voice, the look on his face. It forced her to hum loudly into her pillow, trying to drown out the conjuring of her mind.

There was a knock on her door. Hemery sat up in bed. It must have been early morning, though dawn had not yet bleached the horizon. Draping a large shawl over her nightdress, she approached the door barefoot. Though she knew Raín and dozens of other guards were vigilant at every entrance to the south wing, she threw a glance at the dagger on her side table. Dwalin would chew
her ear off if he knew she opened the door unarmed in the middle of the night.

Hemery opened the door, half hiding behind it. Her eyes widened.

It was Thorin.

Silently, he lifted his eyes to hers, a tense crease between his eyebrows. She tried to gauge his mood, but it was impossible.

When he just stood there, not saying anything, she opened the door fully, moving aside and allowing him to enter. With measured, heavy strides, he went inside, stopping in front of the window, his back to her. Hemery closed the door.

By now he must have heard everything that transpired, what she had done and what they had found out. Why was he so quiet? Why did he come there at all? Why did he not wait until the morning to summon her for a proper scolding?

One of his hands rested on the windowsill, gripping the edge harder than needed to simply lean on. Perhaps he was so vexed that he could not let it rest until he had told her exactly how wrong she had acted. He was probably wondering where to start.

The thought made a surge of annoyance heat her belly. She had only done what she thought was right, trying to help. Dwalin always told her to follow her own sense of justice. If Thorin would punish her for it, she would face it without regrets.

Hemery had enough of the oppressive silence. She wanted it over with.

"Apologies, Sire," she began, acknowledging the transgression she had made. "I realise I shouldn't have taken the liberty of talkin' to Tarren alone."

"No," he replied brusquely before the last syllable was uttered. "You shouldn't have."

His tone stung more than she had feared. Looking down, she noticed her toes beneath the hem of her nightdress and tried to hide them, suddenly feeling very exposed.

He grew quiet again. As if restless, he pushed away from the windowsill, moving along the far wall, not really looking at the tapestries, furniture, tools, or mementos around the room. But he held out a hand, as if to brush his fingertips over the surfaces, but never touching anything.

"And I should have spoken to Mister Balin first."

"Yes," he agreed once more, voice harsh. "You should have."

He completed his turn about the room, passing her by the door. Goosebumps erupted along her spine and neck when she felt a gust of cold air from his billowing cloak, but she kept her eyes down so he would not see the irritation in her face. She knew she always hid her true feelings poorly.

"I wanted to stay, but Kíli insisted I go—"

"My nephew is most anxious to shift any and all culpability from you, wishing to protect his little sister," he interrupted impatiently. "But you're not his sister, nor can he bear the weight of anyone's responsibilities but his own."

Thorin's voice grated on Hemery's ears, the disparagement like needles on her skin.
"Now, given all that has transpired tonight," he continued in a lower register. "I am more convinced than ever that you are not an imbecile. Therefore, I must assume you defy me on purpose."

She glanced up at him, unconsciously betraying herself and confirming his suspicion. He regarded her with thunder in his eyes. She bit the inside of her cheek. She knew she should not, but she had to say something.

"I was worried about their health," Hemery said, forcing herself to hold his gaze. "And rightly so, I might add."

"You underestimate the men's constitution, but overestimate their tenacity," Thorin rumbled curtly. "They would have spilled their darkest secrets long before their lives were in any real danger."

Hemery sighed, draping her shawl higher when she felt it slipping down her shoulders.

"That's not the issue. No one should be exposed to those cells, especially when they are not convicted of any crime. Beheadin' would be merciful compared to dyin' of pneumonia or freezin' to death. You asked for my help, but then expected me to do nothin' when you're mistreatin' those men?"

"I was aware of your perspective, I considered it, and I made a decision," he replied firmly. "I was not ignoring your counsel—I simply chose a different path. I never intended for them to suffer longer than necessary."

His methodical tone frustrated her.

"And who's to say what's necessary?"

"In this case, time told. It did not even take a day for the issue to resolve itself."

If he would be careless about the situation, then so would she.

"Then I guess there's no harm in what I did, either?" she said.

Hemery gritted her teeth and irritably pulled on the collar of her nightdress which threatened to slide down her shoulder from the weight of her shawl. Why could they not have had this conversation earlier when she was dressed?

Thorin did not seem to share her idea of fairness and shot her a dark look.

"And what if you had been mistaken? Would you answer for any damage made by Low's men?"

"I sincerely doubt there was any serious risk. Otherwise, I would not have gone down there," she said, willing him to believe her. "Low couldn't even come up with a decent story to begin with. He might be lyin' about the runaway girl, but he doesn't seem that inventive, to be honest."

"You jeopardized the safety of a prince and of this kingdom," he exclaimed, aggravated.

Hemery froze. She had never heard him raise his voice like that to anyone, much less to her. Thorin's rigid features lost their vehemence, but his words were still heated.

"It is of no consequence whether I agree with your estimation or not. I do not question your intent, but your fealty. You cannot take matters into your own hands and openly ignore my commands. By challenging my judgement, you challenge my power and make my seat open for attack. Injuring
Kíli would make the entire kingdom vulnerable. Raise me from my sleep and harass me with your lectures of high morals if you must, but do not exploit my family to undo my will."

He took a breath, but did not halt in his tirade.

"You did not only expose Kíli to Blackwater pawns, but yourself. As long as you dwell in my mountain, your safety is my responsibility. I asked for your assistance because I believe you are invested in this kingdom. You must allow me to live up to my pledge and protect you in return."

Hemery felt her eyes burn. She had not considered that her actions could be interpreted as disloyal. She would hate for him to think she challenged his ability to govern. It had only been in this particular issue with Blackwater that she had found him unreasonable, that was all.

"I didn't—" she began, but her voice broke. "I just didn't want them to think you were as bad as them."

She forced herself to look at him. His commanding presence seemed to shrink in his bewilderment.

"He called you a tyrant," she explained. "I didn't want you to make it true by treatin' them unjustly."

Silence stretched. Thorin sighed, seemingly done with his rebuke.

"So—" Hemery said after a moment. "What happens now?"

"Nothing," he replied. "The border patrols are still looking for anything out of the ordinary. The men will stay here."

She drew breath to ask where when he intercepted her.

"In the higher levels," he explained. "They will have proper bedding, food, and natural light."

"But for how—"

"For as long as I see fit," he interrupted determinedly, closing the topic for discussion.

Hemery felt very tired. She had not slept all night, and she did not like the tense air between her and Thorin.

"Be grateful that all went well this night," he said, his voice softer. "I know I am."

Hemery followed him in order to see him out and close the door behind him, but he paused before opening the door, turning to face her. Very close now, he spoke.

"There was a time you trusted me without even knowing my name," Thorin said, his eyebrows knotted. "I wish you would try to do so again."

Hemery wanted to assure him she did trust him, but during the better part of that day, she had indeed doubted his means. That was why she had acted the way she had. Thoughtless. Faithless. And he knew it.

Finally, unable to speak, she nodded.

"Despite the manner in which it was performed, you did good work tonight," Thorin said.

Hemery was surprised to hear him admit it, though the satisfaction of his praise soon faded.
"But if you ever defy me like that again, I'll expel you from Erebor." His threat was in a low timbre that ran up her spine.

"I understand," she replied. "Sire."
"That's bollocks. He would never expel you," Hanah said, exasperated amusement in her voice.

Hemery and Hanah walked through the market in Dale, making their way home after their weekly visit with Lady Sigrid. Bror and Dagrún, Hanah's guard, followed them. Frost covered the ground, but with hoods and mittens, the air was bearable enough for a stroll through the market and up to the great entrance of Erebor.

"And even if he did, you never wanted to stay in Erebor anyway. You'd much rather live with Dwalin if it wasn't for me and Híli."

"You didn't see the look in his eyes," Hemery lamented. "Like I'm an enemy of the kingdom." There was not much she could do to change his mind now, so she settled for sighing and inviting her sister to cheer her up.

"It's just 'cause it's fresh. In a couple of days more you'll have embarrassed yourself in a new way and have somethin' completely different to agonize about."

Hemery kicked the frozen ground. "You're probably right. That's what's so awful."

"You shouldn't be too hard on yourself. In the end, somethin' good came out of it. You helped Low and Erebor. Kíli told me how you stacked guilt like marble blocks on the poor man. You should have been a war master or a security chief with that kind of strategic mind manipulation skills. I don't know where you learned to do that."

"I just think too little and talk too much. Same as you."

"Oh, no. That must have come from some master class in Tirith. I never put my foot in it as badly as you." Hanah could not help but laugh.

"I wish I'd never left," Hemery groaned. "Everythin' feels so different. It's like I'm a stranger, like I don't have the right say anythin'. I should have just let Thorin do what he wanted and stayed out of it." She shook her head and pushed her hands into the pockets of her coat.

Hanah leaned closer. "Who cares what the stubborn, old goat thinks anyway," she said.

At last, Hemery joined her sister in the laughter. "Hush, damnit. Are you tryin' to get me banished?"

"I promise I'll come visit you when you work as a barmaid at The Dragon's Head," Hanah jested encouragingly.

"I'd prefer to be called a server or pint provider, thank you very much," Hemery countered, following the joke.

Hanah laughed more. "And I promise I'll be very generous with my tip—"

"Amad," Híli called, interrupting Hanah.

The girl ran up to them as they entered the ante-room of the great entrance. Híli had stayed in the city, attending class, when Hanah and Hemery had left for Dale. Her guard, Nuhir, stood quietly by, patiently waiting to escort her to the next event of the day's agenda.
Híli took her mother's hand, walking with them and talking as if they were in the middle of a conversation.

"Brynja says there is no serpent in the river. But if it could swim up and down from the lake, how could anyone know for sure?"

Every day, Híli would return from class with another quote from her classmate, Brynja. Today it seemed they had discussed the possibility of water snakes. Suddenly, Hemery might have felt a bit guilty for conjuring the idea.

"A serpent in the Long Lake?" Hanah echoed.

"Like the snake demon you fought, Amad."

"The what now?"

Hemery laughed, ignoring Hanah's bewilderment. "Brynja's mother is a blacksmith who believes the world is a flat disc," she explained to Híli, rationally. "I wouldn't place too much faith in Brynja's expertise when it comes to natural phenomena."

"This is the first I've heard of any snake demon in the lake," Hanah said, turning to Hemery with a suspicious glare. "What have you been tellin' her?"

"It was kind of like a morality tale," Hemery skated. "A metaphor."

"A metaphor for what?" Hanah insisted.

Hemery was spared the inquisition when a dwarf approached them at the top of the stairs. It looked like she had been waiting for them. Hemery recognized her as Vánnur, one of Thorin's personal guards.

"Miss Hemery," Vánnur greeted. "King Thorin summons you."

Hemery froze. What was it this time? Had she unwittingly made another mistake? Or was it something she had done earlier that he had just recently found out about?

"What for?" she blurted ineloquently, hoping for a clue.

"I couldn't say, Miss," Vánnur answered blankly.

Hemery sighed, looking at her sister. Hanah looked back with empathy this time, not mockery, pressed her lips together in a tight smile and squeezed Hemery's hand.

Híli seemed to sense the tension between the sisters. "Perhaps he needs your help stamping wax on his letters? I help him with that sometimes, but I've been in class today."

Hemery cracked a smile at that. "Could be," she agreed. "I'd better go straight away then."

With a feeling of walking to her execution, she followed Vánnur past hers and her sister's rooms to Thorin's chambers at the other end of the corridor, where the south wing met the west on the third floor.

Vánnur knocked and let her in, but stayed outside herself. Hemery had never been inside Thorin's rooms before. It was quite similar to Fíli's study, only larger, and with grander furnishings.

Thorin looked up from the parchments on his desk, a quill still in his hand.
"There you are," he rumbled. "I was beginning to think you decided to leave the mountain again."

"I came as soon as I could," Hemery replied politely. She resented that he would assume she avoided his summons. She would have liked to ignore it, but she could not, so she did not.

"Yet I called for you hours ago."

"I'm not in your employ. I'm under no obligation to—"

"Am I your king?" he snapped.

"Yes, Sire," she said carefully, reining in her temper. She did not want to create another conflict due to unnecessary defiance, but he seemed intent on goading her into it.

"So you acknowledge I have the right to summon you when I wish?"

His tone returned to its indifferent drawl so quickly that she wondered which mood was the genuine one.

"Within reason," she added with a nod.

Thorin's piercing stare left her to focus on the parchment on the desk. He swiftly scribbled something, an emphasising line and a determined dot, before dropping the quill into an inkbottle and standing up.

Leaving his desk, he motioned for her to join him by the fireplace. Grateful, she sat in one of the big armchairs, pulling her coat from her shoulders and removing her shawl. The hood had disturbed her hair knot. She felt errant strands at her temples and on her neck, but there was no use in trying to fix them without redoing the whole thing.

Thorin waited until she had stilled in her seat before speaking in a low voice.

"It's been two weeks," he said in tired frustration. "Two weeks and the patrols yield no result. We have found no more agents from Blackwater. Nothing to support or condemn Tarren Low and his men."

Hemery listened, attentive now.

"Soon it will be too cold to travel between Erebor and Blackwater. As you've so good to informed me, we may not incarcerate them all winter without charges." He glanced at her with a knowing look, as if he reluctantly saw the truth in the statement. "I don't particularly care to feed them for the duration, either."

"Do you think they'll continue their search if you let them go?" she asked.

"Perhaps." He drummed one finger on his armrest, thoughtfully.

Hemery did not like the idea that a lonely girl out in the forest would be hunted by a group of rangers to be caught and returned to her mad griffin of a mother, pinned down and paralysed by crushing claws.

"If she is their daughter, as Mister Low seems to believe," Thorin said, "we have little right to keep them from searching every cave and fox hole between here and there. We can only guard our border."

"Is it that simple?" Hem wondered. "If there is a girl, how do we know she's their daughter and not
some poor soul tryin' to escape them like Hanah?"

"We cannot foresee every eventuality, taking every possibility into account," he said.

Hemery closed her eyes briefly, sighing. She knew he was right. Her head hurt from trying to calculate the most likely scenario, the best cause of action.

"And if you keep them here, you will worsen the already infected relation with Blackwater," she added, more to remind herself than Thorin.

The warmth of the fire infused her blood and muddled her mind a bit after her time outdoors. Tired, she leaned one elbow on her armrest, rubbing her eye. There was no right or wrong in this situation, just difficulties.

She found him watching her. Perhaps he waited for her to share her conclusion?

"I think you should let them go," she said softly. No irritation, no command—just her sincere opinion. "Have some guards escort them to the edge of the kingdom, give them some bread, and tell them to drag their miserable arses back home," she suggested with a shrug.

Thorin did not smile, but his eyes glinted slightly in the firelight. She recognised the concealed amusement from when she was younger. It was enough to encourage her.

"I'm sure you'll add a warnin' or a sufficiently terrifying threat in there somewhere to keep them from comin' back. Or at least make them think twice about it," she added dryly, smirking.

A smile tugged at his mouth, but he did not let it out. He just nodded in agreement.

"Visual and venomous, I promise," he said.

Hemery grinned, but his steely scrutiny did not lessen after she had told him what he wanted to hear. She had to look away, shifting her eyes to the embers.

When he did not speak again, she wondered if that was all he wished to discuss with her. And why had he wanted to discuss it with her at all?

"What does Balin and Fíli say?"

"Regarding?" he asked, as if he had already forgotten what they had talked about.

"Low and his men," she explained. "Do they agree?"

This time Thorin looked away.

"I have not asked their opinion, though I'm sure they will be relieved," he admitted, as if he was suffering from the way people constantly disagreed with him.

So he had decided to release Low? And she helped him reach this decision? Hemery was surprised, but glad.

"Why would you not ask them? Why me?" she asked carefully.

"I will finally do what you wanted all along," he countered with a glare. "Are you not satisfied?"

Hemery bit the inside of her cheek to keep from smiling. Clearly, he did not want to tell her.
"Of course, Sire," she said, pacifying him with a respectful dip of her chin. "I just thought they would be able to counsel you better than I could," she said, purposely modest.

He was silent a moment, as if deliberating whether she deserved to know the reason.

"I prefer to not consult Balin and my nephews often," he finally said. "It is better for them."

"How so?" she asked, confused.

Thorin gestured vaguely with one hand, as if balancing something back and forth, weighing his words.

"It provides a certainty and confidence in me that I need them to utilise in other areas. If they are not involved in all decisions, they are not aware of any doubt or indecision I may experience before executing them."

Astonished, Hemery listened to his confession. "And how often does this happen?"

He frowned, suddenly. "I am perfectly capable of making my own decisions. I do not require their handholding regardless of whether I may or may not struggle with moral dilemmas."

"Of course not, Sire," she pursed her lips and shook her head, trying to look nonchalant and not laugh.

"You, on the other hand, are mankind and have insights into the attitudes and behaviours of Blackwater," he explained.

Hemery was glad she was able to help, especially after their previous problems, but any appreciation he showed seemed designed to be temporary.

"And since you don't hold any political power," Thorin continued, "your opinions about me or my actions are incomparable to that of my council and does not affect the government of my court."

So she was merely an ear for him to vent to? Thinking about it, she was not surprised. That had always been her function in the past.

"I understand," she said through tense teeth, "Sire."
Unexpected Whispers

Despite King Thorin's insistence that he could handle his own affairs, Hemery found herself summoned to court more and more often. It began with issues concerning Blackwater, but developed into any and all issues Thorin could not be bothered to handle due to laziness or indifference, particularly business regarding men in the neighbouring kingdoms.

Two or three times a week, Hemery would hear a knock on her door and be brought to assembly. Every time, she had less and less preparation for whatever discussions were underway. And every time, she was forced to improvise compromises and milder penalties when agreements were violated and conventions were not followed. Sometimes, Thorin was not even present at the hearings, but left her to discuss the problems with Balin and the rest of the council. The new duties placed on her made her feel like a child again, unprepared and inexperienced, like the time when she was asked to punish Beren before a crowd of strangers.

Only once did she have a moment to speak to Thorin about it. She had just settled a dispute between two mining teams who claimed entitlement over the same vein of precious ore by saying they should extract the metal together, donate the profits to the house of healing, and consider themselves lucky they had a chance to mine in such a rich mountain at all. Tired of settling petty grievances, the council had agreed with her. When she approached Thorin afterwards, he had merely dismissed her insecurity, saying that she should not worry about how he and the council chose to conduct their business, but continue to do as he asked.

Hemery suspected he was merely relieved he did not personally need to wrestle every visitor, every dignitary, and every complainant who addressed the court, not caring how she resolved issues as long as she did not create more disputes.

Hemery rarely saw Thorin other than on his throne or at the head of the council table. He never occupied any of the chairs in the library when she was there, nor did she happen to come upon him in Dis’ rooms, or in the corridors. He only ate supper with the rest of his family a couple of times a week, and he was always brief when beckoned to join the conversation. He always had been a dwarf of few words, Hemery recalled from her younger years, but she wondered if he was not more reticent now.

She presumed Blackwater still haunted his thoughts. It remained the ever-present threat, though no news reached them all winter.

Thus, the cold season passed in Erebor.

"I adore the spring," Sigrid said to Hanah, turning her face to the pale sun as they walked the streets of Dale. "Though it wakens both good and bad. The swindlers, thieves, and gamblers return like migrating birds. Or are roused from their holes like bears catching the scent of fresh game."

Hanah knew Sigrid worried about her people constantly. According to her, misery was spreading in her city.

"We can't keep people from makin' poor decisions. Nor punish them for gullibility," Hanah said.

"True," Sigrid said. "I've always found a government works best when it governs least, but recently
we've been forced to increase security everywhere. Esgaroth gets the brunt of the bandits. Fewer choose to come up the mountain because of the rumours of the harsh penalties in Erebor. But as people grow poor, soon it won't matter how heavy the law comes down on those who break it."

Hanah listened with a furrowed brow. Surely, there was some hope?

"My sister is workin' with the schoolmasters in Erebor to improve literacy. Perhaps even get free education for all who live in the mountain."

Sigrid laughed. "And who will pay for this philanthropic endeavour?"

"The state, hopefully." Hanah shrugged. She was not involved in the details, but from what Hemery told her, it seemed promising.

Sigrid nodded, thoughtfully. "If anyone can see it through, it's her."

"Many think it's a good idea, in the long term. Only dwarflings will benefit at the moment. The older bulls will not see the point, but their children will. All should be given the same opportunity to learn. In the end, education is the foundation of equality."

"Let me know how it goes. If it works, I may adopt the strategy."

The women came to the southern wall where the view down to Esgaroth was the clearest. The trees were just beginning to shift colours to light green, and the towers and flags of Esgaroth proudly broke the glimmering waves on the lake in the low valley.

"It's easy for me here. I have father who instils respect and love in the citizens still, but Bain is all alone down there."

"He has his council, surely?" Hanah asked.

"Aye, but they're weak. The city may have been rebuilt, but it never recovered. It's a hive.Too many people in poorly built homes. The northern climate forces villagers from all around to seek their fortune in the city. After every failed crop, we see hundreds of newcomers—nowhere to live, nowhere to work. We reckon over half of Esgaroth's circulating currency is bound to the black market. Stolen goods, mostly. They don't pay enough tax for Bain to keep eyes on everything that's happening. He can't keep the peace."

"Why does he not ask your father for help?"

"Pride, of course. And father doesn't want to undermine Bain's authority by stepping in unrequested."

And thus, Sigrid's hands were tied. Hanah thought it frustrating, not for the first time, the limited power of sisters and daughters, and even princes and kings. They stood in silent contemplation for a moment.

Sigrid turned her back on the view, leaning on the stone wall. Carefully, she met Hanah's gaze.

"Surely, there is no need for guile between you and I? We can speak freely, yes?"

Hanah had known Sigrid for eight years. She had never explicitly had to ask Hanah for her confidence.

"Of course." Hanah nodded.
"I know that king Thorin has . . . taken your sister under his wing," she began, looking at her beneath sharp eyebrows. "Such influence over the king and admittance into the council's sphere given to a young girl, it's—" She gathered her thoughts. "Unprecedented."

Hanah was not surprised. Hemery and Thorin had seemed to become friends when they had first moved to Erebor. She suspected that Thorin, like her, found solace in speaking with such an unspoiled, honest voice in a court full of sycophants and egocentrics. However, Hanah too had found it strange that Thorin would so openly ask her advice on issues regarding the entire kingdom.

"I understand it's unusual," Hanah agreed.

"It's more than that," Sigrid said. Her eyes flickered to the side, as if making sure no one overheard, or because she found it difficult to meet Hanah's eye. "It's cause for gossip."

Hanah did not like where the conversation was headed. She frowned.

"What sort of gossip?"

Sigrid gave her a pointed stare. "The unsavoury kind. Quite graphic suggestions about how a young lass would gain power over a lonely, old king."

Hanah gasped, outraged, but did not have time to form words to express it before Sigrid continued, stilling Hanah with a hand on her arm.

"Some even brazen enough to accuse her of witchcraft, befuddling his mind to do her bidding in court . . . as well as in bed."

"Who would dare say somethin' like that?" Hanah attempted to whisper, but it came out in an incredulous hiss. She did not care if people gossiped about the king, but Hemery was a woman of mankind without any title or position to protect her. One could question and eventually quench accusations against the king—not against unmarried, female smiths in a dwarven kingdom.

"Enough for it to have spread to Dale and Esgaroth. Most of it is in jest, but I thought you should know. I didn't want to burden Hemery—I know she's only trying to help. I'm leaving it up to you if she should be told or not."

Hanah scoffed in incredulity. "Well, what can be done?" She folded her arms, trying to calm herself.

Hemery was so young, she thought. Who could think so vile thoughts of her? That she would ensnare Thorin in some kind of carnal entrapment or perform dark magic on him to do her bidding? It boiled her blood to think anyone saw her in such light.

"There's no way to stop the slander. And even if I told her, she can't do anythin' about it. She won't refuse the king, and I know she'd rather die than explain to him why she can't attend court anymore. No—" She shook her head, rubbing her brow. "I'll let her live in peace as long as possible. As long as she's not comin' to harm."

Sigrid listened and nodded. Turning to gaze down the mountain once again, she let Hanah process what she had just learnt.

"Whatever shadows it brings in its long evenings," Sigrid said, "summer is too short."

The wind that reached them on the peak was still chilly.
"Aye," Hanah agreed. "Shorter and shorter for every year, it seems."
Hemery ran down the stairs to the great hall, but stopped in front of the smaller door next to the throne room. Catching her breath, she saw Balin waiting for her.

"Miss Skinner," he said formally, but his eyes betrayed him with an amused twinkle.

"I hear no screamin' yet," she said, bypassing pleasantries. "I take it they have not tried to kill each other?" She motioned to the people beyond the door.

"Don't be so sure," Balin replied. "Bain wants to lower the trade tax, hoping to get his way because of Esgaroth and Erebor's special relationship."

"Thorin hates mixing business with sentimentality. And he hates Bain," Hemery specified. "The man would have a better chance getting' lower taxes by comin' out and simply threatening to cut off our trade route through the lake."

Balin shook his head, unbothered. "He wouldn't dare."

"They're stubborn as goats, both of them. Who knows?"

"Erebor could establish new routes within a year or two. Esgaroth, on the other hand, would dry up—so to speak," he explained, smiling at his pun.

"Thorin feels too much responsibility towards Lake Town to let that happen."

"So much for his disdain of sentimentality," Balin said dryly.

Hemery sighed. There might not have existed any immediate threat to Erebor these last thirty years, but consequences of old damages remained in their everyday lives. "The dragon will never stop haunatin' you people."

The door to the assembly opened, and Kíli appeared from within.

"They're just about to resume after their midday meal," he said.

"Good," Hemery said. "The last thing we need is a hungry—angrier than usual—king."

Kíli opened the door wider, allowing them inside. A big table of polished, black marble sat in the centre of the room. Thorin and four other dwarves on one side, three men on the other. Several people stood along the walls, men as well as dwarves, guards and advisors.

One of the men at the table rose from his seat. The chair made a grating sound against the stone floor when it was pushed back.

"Lady Hemery," Bain exclaimed cheerfully, though the atmosphere in the room was somber and tense. He was a man of five and forty, clean-shaven, and tall with a handsome posture. His hair was pushed back, gathered with a cord at the nape where grey mingled with brown strands.

Hemery had encountered him several times in formal settings during the last few months, finding him to be a pleasant man, but often carried a forced smile. Not that he was in any way false, but she thought that perhaps he was not as happy as he attempted to appear.

She smiled pleasantly at him and offered her hands when he approached her. Men did not shake
women's hands in the same manner dwarves did. Instead, he took both her hands in his and held them while they exchanged greetings, thumbs moving in a light caress on her knuckles.

"I have not the honour of such a title, Lord Bain," Hemery said.

"And yet, I will bestow the honour upon you as often as I can," he replied graciously before he released her.

"I'd rather you bestowed honour on your agreements, m'lord," she said, tilting her head in question, inviting him to explain himself.

Bain had the decency to adopt a regretful face at that.

"Times change, my lady. Currency changes. What seemed reasonable yesterday does not seem so today," he said mournfully. "And His Majesty King Thorin does not see favourably on compromises," he added, addressing both her and the council.

Bain's melody sounded similar to the usual lilt of men who would rather be paid by Erebor than to pay Erebor. However, Bain was rarely anything but frank. And if he used the same kind of affected regret to gain sympathy, something was clearly wrong.

Hemery did not reply right away, neither did Balin or Kíli who had moved to stand next to Thorin's chair. No one sat at the king's table unless asked, and he had not uttered a word. He merely leaned back in his seat, hands leisurely on the armrests, and followed the conversation with a certain annoyed disinterest.

Hemery let the silence stretch as she moved to a sideboard where servants had readied tea. She added milk and sipped her cup before speaking again.

"Erebor has conducted trade here since before either of us were born," Hemery said, keeping her voice clear and even, but soft, in order to neither confirm nor dismiss his argument. "If anyone knows time, it's these noble dwarves."

She swept her hand toward the table of council members.

"You and I both admire their wisdom which they have gained through that time. The kind of time we could never dream of experiencin'." She talked of her and Bain as if they were the same, to indicate a familiarity and her understanding of his perspective.

"Where is the reason we cannot find an agreement?" Hemery smiled politely so he could find no offense in her words.

"The terms are agreeable," Bain said, as if this had been his opinion the whole time. "But conditions demand we build a new house of healing. I didn't want to burden you with my problems, but . . ." He sounded genuinely concerned. "There was a tragedy at the old house, a devastating fire that spread quickly. It was impossible to save. That's why we need this exemption, you see. Expenses have unexpectedly risen."

Hemery kept her face blank, but glanced at the king and the others. Thorin made no attempt to interfere. He merely stroked his bearded chin as if in contemplation or boredom; she could never tell which. Hem focused on Bain once more.

"That's truly unfortunate. However——" Hemery's eyebrows knitted in thought. "As I understand it, that house was condemned. Was it not supposed to be torn down?"
"It was good for a few more years," Bain defended.

"Yet, the house was empty when the fire started. It was soon contained, and no one was hurt. That's hardly a tragedy."

"That fire destroyed two thousand square feet of my city's foundation—"

"The tragedy is that you use this convenient accident as leverage in your bargain," Hemery maintained, "despite the fact that your office has not paid their taxes in full for years. The money saved there should surely be enough to build ten new houses of healing—even on water. I suggest you find the missin' funds so you can start reconstruction."

Bain's eyes revealed the feverish activity in his mind, trying to come up with some way to sway her. She knew Bain did not have it easy as lord of Lake Town, but she also knew Erebor could not keep making exceptions for him without being forced to do the same for others. He had to find a way to solve his financial issues. It was his duty.

"You would hold old mistakes against us in time of need?" he asked.

His voice was bordering on accusation, and Hem felt a flare of stress in her chest. Thorin would not stand for much more of this. She had to wrap it up.

"Apples," she exclaimed. "You may have lower tax on apples."

Bain almost snorted. "That's absurd."

"Why, because they rot when hoarded in vaults? Yes, that would be absurd, but don't say the king never compromises." Hemery smiled tightly.

Bain looked at the king, probably to protest, but whatever he saw there made his jaw clench in resignation. She was prepared for a different opinion from the council, but there was nothing. She suspected they found Bain's wish even more inappropriate than she did.

Hem's gaze remained on Bain. He smiled without mirth as he approached her.

"I understand. I thank His Majesty King Thorin for his time. And I apologize for wasting yours."

She smiled amicably again, trying to diffuse the last of the tension.

"I truly believe Erebor and Esgaroth will continue to thrive side by side." Hemery refrained from saying together, making it clear the respective cities would be kept separate and that he was on his own.

"Of course, my lady."

"I'll see you out," she said, holding out a hand as an invitation for him to escort her from the room.

They walked through the great corridor, Bain's men and Bror behind them. Hemery wondered who of Bain's advisors had found it a wise idea to bring this request to Thorin. Despite her answer in the assembly, she sincerely hoped Bain would manage to regain control of his city.

"Will this be brought to rest, m'lord?" she asked as they moved away from the meeting room.

Bain looked at her, a friendly softness in his eyes once more.

"You look well, Lady Hemery," he said, changing the subject. "The south seemed to agree with
you."

Hemery had loved her time in Minas Tirith, but the fulfilment of learning was a temporary satisfaction. She had longed to return to the Lonely Mountain where she could put her knowledge to use together with her family. At the time, she had no idea just how much she would have use of her knowledge of the cultures of dwarves and men.

"The north agrees with me better," she stated with a content smile.

"Your talents are wasted on these fossils," he said.

Hemery glanced around her, furtively making sure no one heard him. She knew Bain paid her a compliment, a conspiratorial jest between the two of them, but this was an aspect of men she did not miss from her time in Tirith. She could never forgive men's natural instinct to look down on dwarves—no pun intended. Dwarves were stubborn, suspicious, and hot-tempered, but never did they mock other races as men so easily did.

She smiled patiently. "My talents are my own, m'lord, to use as I see fit."

"Curious how you should choose to . . . forfeit your life to serve a dwarven king," Bain mused.

"Forfeit?" she echoed in disbelief.

"Does he not demand your presence whenever he chooses? At all hours of the day?"

Sure, sometime it was early morning or late night, but she would rather he called her when he needed to than to delay important business. Of course, it was Thorin's business, not hers. And she still did not know why he placed this responsibility on her when he had others in his employ that could just as well do what she did.

"Not all hours of the day. It's a great honour to aid the council. Balin is an old friend, and Kíli is like a brother to me," she stated, facing forward with her chin up.

Hemery could make up excuses to Bain or anyone else who asked, but she knew why she did not refuse Thorin. When he summoned her and when she spoke before the council, she felt good. She felt like she did something worthwhile, even if it was just slapping the wrist of some tavern manager for using the wrong waste disposal tunnels. She felt like she helped the people of Erebor, that she was a part of Erebor. And if she happened to please Thorin in the process, she would gladly attend court every day.

"And what of Thorin?" Bain asked. "What is he to you?"

Guileless as Hemery was, distanced from the formal setting of the meeting room, she immediately over-thought the question. Thorin was the uncle of her brother-in-law, but also not. Fíli and Hanah were not married. Thorin was the great uncle to her niece. Yes, that was true. But it did not answer why she attended court on his request. Were they friends? She had asked herself this many times, but found all answers unsatisfactory. He was not her friend like Balin, Kíli, or Dwalin. No one was like Thorin. And Thorin did not have friends.

"He's—" Surprise at his forwardness made her stutter. "He's my king." It was the most honest and simple answer to a very difficult question.

Bain nodded, thinking about her response. "Take care, Lady Hemery. I would hate for you to lose yourself in these tunnels."
His concern was real, but she did not quite understand what he meant. Did he not think it proper for her, as mankind, to attend to a dwarven court? Not wishing to extend this line of conversation any longer, she smiled nonchalantly.

"Thank you for your consideration, m'lord, but rock walls can't hold me."

"If you change your mind, you can always come work for me," he said.

She pursed her lips, as if considering her proposal. "Get yourself some new accountants, and we'll talk," she jested.

He chuckled, squeezing her hand one last time.

Hemery left Lord Bain at the end of the corridor before returning to the meeting hall. As she neared the closed doors, she could hear heated voices on the other side. She entered swiftly, fearing the council disapproved of the result of the day's discussion. But most of them had dispersed, only Thorin, Kíli, and Balin remained.

"Next time, I shall cut off his greedy hands," Thorin growled to Balin before he noticed Hem's presence and fell quiet.

Hemery hurried to close the door behind her.

"Please," she hissed forcefully. "Keep it down. He's barely out the door."

Thorin turned away, clearly still agitated. Balin and Kíli averted their eyes as well, as if they had been discussing something too sensitive for her ears.

Was there some part of Bain's problems Hemery was unaware of? The council did not want to agree to Bain's wishes, and she managed to send him home without too much resistance; she thought she had done rather well.

"What's the matter?"

No one spoke.

"I hope you're not unhappy with my performance," she said, uncertain now.

Balin approached her then, smiling tensely, and motioned for her to join him outside. He was careful not to touch her.

"Gratitude, Miss Hemery. Yer assistance is invaluable, as always."

He obviously used the compliment to get rid of her so the dwarves could speak privately.

"Fine," she settled, taking a calming breath. She had realised long ago that people would always infuriate her, and it was always in her best interest to not show it.

"If anyone needs me," she said, "I'll be in Hanah's workshop—not to be disturbed."

Hemery turned on her heel and left them to their secrets.

Admittedly, she was not a member of the king's council, he did not even pay her for her time, but she would feel much more secure in her tasks if they allowed her insight to every aspect of the problem. She felt like she was treading water when they shut her out like that.
The next few days were quiet. Hemery spent the mornings with Dis and the schoolmasters, going through the details of the new education system. The afternoons she spent working with Hanah.

"There's smoke comin' from the ridge," Hanah said one day as they sat down in her shop.

Hemery froze, staring at her sister. Hanah had a needle in her hand and a thimble on her fingertip, pushing through thick leather without pause when she returned the look.

"Fire smoke?" Hem asked.

"Aye. From Blackwater," Hanah clarified. "Sigrid saw it from her yard this mornin'. A big fire, she reckoned."

"Is the town destroyed?" Hemery did not know how she felt about that. Glee and shame to accompany it, or concern?

"Most of the houses are stone, but the landlord's is not." Hanah pursed her lips in thought.

Hem's nails dug distractedly into her palm. "Is there any news? Any way to know for sure?"

"No, but Thorin is dead set on findin' out what happened." Hanah frowned. "He and Kíli are leavin' in two days."

"They're actually goin' to Blackwater?" Hemery felt a trickle of ice along her spine.

"He's takin' a small company, only fifty dwarves on horseback. It's personal for Thorin, otherwise he'd send someone in his stead."

Hemery's mind reeled. So few. If Thorin angered the landlords—which he would—fifty dwarves would be too few to defend themselves.

"I want to go with them, but the king won't hear of it," Hanah said through tense jaws. "And Fíli doesn't agree with me, so I have no support there. If he was goin' himself, I might have been able to persuade him, but Thorin doesn't want Fíli comin' along either. Not after, you know—what happened to him . . ."

"Why would you want to go?" Hem asked, astonished her sister would even contemplate returning to Blackwater.

"Someone must be there to caution them, to keep Thorin from provokin' Brage or keep him from rising to Brage's baitin'."

When Hem kept looking at her like she had lost all sense, Hanah explained further.

"I can't help but feel like I caused this, all those years ago." She looked at the needle in her hand. "I know bad blood had already boiled for a long time between Brage and the dwarves, but . . . if I hadn't angered Lady Brage, makin' her think I was a traitor, maybe she wouldn't have sent Maaret to kill—"

"Oh, stop it!" Hem snapped, but regretted her harsh tone. "You can't say such things," she continued softly. "She had already drawn those plans before you stepped into her halls. She lives for vengeance. It's all she cares about. And she doesn't care how long it takes or who gets in her way . . . ."

Hem trailed off, feeling her own words resonate, reminding her of someone else she knew.
"That's why I have to go." Hanah caught her gaze, looking at her with wide, expressive eyes. "They mustn't come into conflict. You know Thorin, he has a temper—they all do," she said, rolling her eyes. "Someone has to save him from himself."

*But not her,* Hemery thought. Not Hanah. She had risked her life too many times—almost died at Brage's hands too many times.

"I'll go," Hemery said.

"What?" Hanah was taken aback.

"I'll go in your place."

"No." Hanah shook her head, resuming her work as if ignoring the idea. "I don't want you there. And besides, Thorin won't allow it."

"I'm not as important as you. I'm sure Thorin will hardly care if I follow them to Blackwater," Hem clarified.

"Not as important—?!!" Hanah's eyes flew to Hem's.

"As the mother of Durin's heir? No, I'm certainly not," Hem chuckled.

Hanah snorted and rubbed her eyes.

"Not sure what use I would be, though," Hem admitted. She had not even been able to persuade Thorin to give a blanket to a freezing man from Blackwater, much less stop him from antagonising people who already hated him. "But I'll try to do whatever I think you'd have done."

Hanah pushed her needle with unnecessary force through the leather, working in silence for such a long moment that Hemery believed she had obstinately let the matter go.

"He does listen to you," Hanah finally claimed reluctantly. "Thorin, I mean. And neither he nor Kili would let anythin' happen to you out there—if they could help it," she added, as if to convince herself.

Her focus was still on the work in her hands.

"I don't want you to go back there. I really don't. But I know you can navigate them through a confrontation. You can make sure those dwarves come back alive and that this doesn't escalate into violence between the cities."

She sighed and put down her work, looking at Hem beseechingly. "It really ought to be me. If you're at all uncomfortable at the prospect of goin'—" She let the promise linger in the air.

And Hemery definitely did not want to go; she had not forgotten all Brage had done to her and Hanah. If she did go, Hemery feared she would be the one to bring violence on the Brages.

But it was not what Hanah wanted. She would do anything for Hanah. And if her influence could spare even one life, of course she would go.

She sat up straight in her chair, stroking her hair and following the strands to the tight knot at the back. Taking a deep breath, she shook her head in determination.

"No," Hemery said.
At dinner, Thorin was nowhere to be seen.

Kíli sat next to Hemery, regarding her with a worried frown. "So you are set on joining us?"

Hemery glanced at Hanah accusingly. Was she conspiring with Kíli to persuade her to stay home? Surely not.

"Don't worry, Kíli," Hanah said, smiling patiently. "Hem will protect you."

His appetite seemed to take priority after hearing this news, and he filled his plate.

"Praise Mahal. For a while there, I feared I was setting out towards my doom."

"I haven't done anythin' yet," Hemery said. She had not had time to properly grasp the idea that she was going back to that cursed place after ten years.

"Your presence will be a comfort in itself," Dis said from the head of the table. "I, for one, will sleep soundly knowing you are all there together. It is a great service you are rendering us all."

"Now, there's only one more thing to do," Fíli said grimly.

"What's that?" Hemery asked.

"Tell Uncle, of course," he smirked.

Hemery's stomach flipped. Hopefully, Fíli and Kíli would do the telling and she would merely do the accompanying. This time, it suited her fine.

"Where are you going?" Híli asked from across the table, looking curiously at the adults around the table.

"Eh—" Hemery began uncertainly. "You remember that snake demon I told you about—?"

"Híli," Hanah loudly interrupted Hemery's attempt at an explanation. "I'll explain later, love."
"I told you—you didn't have to come," Hemery said over her shoulder to Kíli as they weaved through people in the streets of Dale, Kíli's guards and Ráin trying to keep up, all heading to The Dragon's Head.

She pulled her coat tighter around her. The sun was setting, leaving a frosty spring evening in its wake.

"If you think I'd leave my lucky charm to go gallivanting through taverns by herself, getting drunk and starting fights before we even leave for Blackwater, you're very much mistaken. At least not without me."

Hemery rolled her eyes. As soon as he had heard she was going to seek Dwalin at the tavern after dinner, he had invited himself.

"You sound responsible enough, but you'd seize any and all opportunities to have a pint," Hem said.

"One does not exclude the other. And I'd seize any opportunity to have a pint with my wee sister," he said sickly sweet, throwing a hefty arm around her neck.

"Uh, get off," Hemery grunted, trying to escape from under the suffocating weight, but could not suppress a smile. "And if you postpone fulfillin' your duties for a few hours because of your pint, I'm sure you don't mind, either?"

"I'm prepared to put my agenda aside to escort you to these seedy establishments any time, m'lady," he replied, showing all his white teeth in a wide grin. His dark locks tickled her cheek as he bent to touch his forehead to her temple in camaraderie. "Now that you're a grown lass, you'll be my new drinking partner since Fíli's become all stuffy and stay-at-homey."

"Thanks for makin' me your second choice," Hemery said wryly.

"No, no—you're my third. Dwalin's my second, but he lives too far away. No, I need someone who is just down the hall."

Hemery frowned, but had to admit she saw his reasoning.

"Strangely enough, I actually understand that. But you saw how well I did in Tirith. Don't you want someone whose digestion is a little more . . . dwarvish?"

She knew she would never be able to withstand as much strong drink as Kíli or Dwalin. She chuckled just trying to imagine it.

"Did you think I taught you that trick because I like to watch you choke and waste good ale?" Kíli ruffled her hair playfully. Hemery did not find it endearing or funny, swatted his hands away, and tried to fix her hair. The knot was intact, but had lost its hold and came to rest on her neck in shapeless ringlets. She tutted with extreme annoyance and raised her hood.

"Yes, you were highly amused, as I recall," she replied, glaring at him.

"Well, that too, but first and foremost, I was preparing you for the reality of the competitive northern taverns," he proclaimed seriously, tucking his thumbs into his belt as he walked in long
strides, holding his stubbled chin high. "Can't have my apprentice falling asleep like a snot-nosed stable boy after only five pints. That won't do at all."


Kíli narrowed his eyes, pointing a short but strong finger at her accusingly. "You've been slacking in your training."

"Which training is that? The one where I become the best sword fighter east of the Misty Mountains, or the one where you turn me into a cross-eyed slug? I only have time and energy to commit to one field, and we both know which one I'll choose."

"Hmph," Kíli huffed in derision. "Never pegged you for a quitter, Skinner."

"I'm not drinkin' five pints of that horse sedative you call refreshments, Kíli. It's not gonna happen."

Ráin opened the door to The Dragon's Head, sweeping the great room with her sharp eyes before letting the rest in.

As usual, the room was crowded and rowdy. Lanterns hung from wooden beams in the high ceiling, casting a warm light on the merry guests. As it was getting late, most of them had already had supper and had moved on to drinking. Some played card or dice games, and a group was singing and playing music by the far wall, next to the fireplace.

Hemery spotted Dwalin, Balin, Bofur, and Nori at a corner table. Kíli snatched up a couple of chairs as they made their way over, offering one to Hemery.

"Oy, look who's decided to join the big lads for a night out," Bofur called cheerfully when they sat. He rose halfway from his seat, attracting the attention of the barman with an inelegant wave.

"See," Kíli triumphed. "Bofur agrees with me."

"Oh, I see alright," Hemery said. "Trust dwarves to underestimate the consequences of ale drinking."

She lowered her hood, but did not remove her coat. Bofur laughed insensitively at her hair, and she tried to order her disturbed, brown tresses. His continued chuckles told her any attempts were futile, or possibly that she made things worse.

"It's Kíli's fault," she muttered.

Bofur calmed his amusement. "Can hardly tell the difference, love."

Despite the busy night, six fresh pints soon appeared on the table.

"Apologies," Hem addressed the barmaid. "I'm not havin' any."

Kíli put a hand, heavy like a snow shovel, on top of her pint. "We'll keep it, thanks," he said, smiling at the serving girl. She, in turn, rolled her eyes at their antics and left, clearly too busy care.

"Rule number one," Kíli said sternly, turning to Hem. "If it's free, you drink it."

Hemery sighed. She guessed she could have one taste, though she did not much care for it since her experience last time with ale in combination with Kíli and Bofur.

"Rule number two," Dwalin grumbled. "Never listen to anythin' Kee tries to teach ye."
Hemery smiled at him gratefully, before pushing the full tankard toward Kíli.

"What is yer purpose here, lass, if not to quench yer thirst?" Dwalin asked, leisurely taking a long swig of his drink.

She wanted to object towards his chosen phrase, but realised he most likely genuinely considered ale to be better than water for slaking thirst.

Hemery glanced at Balin. "I take it you've heard about Blackwater."

"Aye," Dwalin said, resting his elbows on the table, his face darkening. "Seems Thorin's finally grown a pair of—" he stopped himself, glancing at Hem.

Hemery was not a child; she knew what he had been about to say. But she still felt her cheeks blaze at the thought of any part of Thorin 'growing.' Nori snorted, as if hiding a snicker.

"Finally grown some sense," Dwalin quickly amended, "takin' the fight to them, instead of waitin' for the next disaster."

"So you think it's wise?" Hemery looked between Dwalin and Balin. "Thorin takin' only fifty dwarves to investigate whatever in Mahal's bloody name is goin' on over there?"

"It's the best opportunity he's had in a decade," Balin stated. "He'll not be swayed now." He shook his head.

It sounded as if he had tried, Hemery thought.

"Fifty dwarves can handle anythin' those troll-fuckers throw at them," Dwalin said confidently. He was apparently not averse to colourful language when it came to the Brages.

"It's not ideal, I agree," Balin said, ignoring Dwalin's arrogance. "But we have no reason to fear the meeting will result in conflict."

"But—"Hem began, "you said yourself it was a good idea. That it was about time Thorin confronted them . . . or somethin' like that, I'm sure you said—"

"Never mind that," Dwalin barked. "Thorin may wage any war he pleases, but he's not draggin' you into the fray. Over my rotten carcass," he spoke through gritted teeth.

Hemery recoiled. She respected Dwalin's opinions as much as her sister's, but she was not sure if he spoke rationally or simply worried about her.

"But don't you think there's less risk of violence if I help?"

"Turning Brage's head could be trickier that turning Thorin's," Nori drawled lazily.

At that, Dwalin scowled at Nori with the fire of a hundred dragons.
Hemery frowned in confusion. "What do you mean?"

"Oy, none of that talk now," Bofur laughed tensely, trying to change the subject. "Tell us more about this suicide mission ye're venturin' out on," he encouraged Hemery, as if discussing a jolly summer holiday.

"Well, it's better me than Hanah. I promised her I'd help Thorin, and I'm not about to go back on my word," she said, determined.

"I don't want either of ye goin'." Dwalin maintained a sour expression, as if having this conversation caused him stomach pains.

"Hanah believes Thorin needs supervision, which I'm sure you agree with. You told me to always listen to my sister, remember?" Hem crossed her arms.

"Aye, until ye were old enough to make yer own judgements. Don't go agreein' to fools' errands just 'cause people ask ye nicely or make ye feel heroic. Ye come in here askin' me if I think it's a good idea to go pokin' a sleepin' bear in its own den. But what do you think?" he challenged.

Hemery thought a moment, biting the inside of her cheek. If she stayed home, she would worry about all the things that could happen to Thorin and Kili and everyone who went with them. She could not stand doing nothing.

"It may not be a good idea," Hem said, tilting her head. "But it could get a lot worse if I don't go."

"If ye've already made yer mind up, why ask me?"

"Maybe I just wanted some reassurances, for once, instead of pessimism. Is it too much to ask for you to smile and say everythin will be fine?"

"Is it my responsibility to smile now?" Dwalin scoffed.

Hemery sighed and slumped down in her chair. She guessed it was too much to ask.

The music and raucous surroundings filled the air for a few moments as no one at the table spoke. Kili cleared his throat awkwardly. "And besides," he said, trying to lighten the mood. "We have yet to ask Uncle if he'll let her come with us."

Dwalin watched him beneath dark, bushy eyebrows. "So it's not settled?"

Hemery avoided his eyes, shrugging. "No," she admitted.

Dwalin's shoulders relaxed at that. "Well then, I'd not go saddlin' any ponies just yet if I were you." He took another long swig from his drink.

The music and noise once again penetrated Hemery's senses. The room was sweltering and the lack of fresh air made her almost feel inebriated without drinking anything. She was pulling off her coat when she noticed Bofur's and Nori's focus had turned to the musicians. Stilling, she tried to hear what they were playing.

The king and his court is like husband and wife

Gold coins and fine maids cause the greatest strife
If I were as fair, say those who dare

as the gold-spinning lass

my King’s lust would never pass

.

Intrigued by an unfamiliar melody and Bofur’s and Nori’s obvious interest, Hemery listened to the words while Kíli and Balin continued to discuss details of the upcoming trip.

.

Lords harken to prattle

made only less bitter

by lips smooth as butter

and lashes that batter

.

She acts a maiden brittle

Spells in the king’s ear mutter

Silk dresses flutter

and servants chatter

.

The king and his court is like husband and wife

Gold coins and fine maids cause the greatest strife

If I were as fair, say those who dare

As the gold-spinning lass

My King's lust would never pass

.

"What is it about?" Hemery asked Bofur. "I've never heard it before."

"Not rightly sure," he evaded, but the way he worriedly glanced at Dwalin made her think he did. And an uneasy feeling settled in her stomach.

.

She made him think he caught her

Perchance let him pluck her

When speared, she doth smile
King fooled by her guile

Hemery gasped and covered her mouth at the vulgar imagery. Hemery had not visited The Dragon's Head for some time, and never at such a late hour, but she could never recall such entertainment being offered at the establishment. The crowd nearest the singer, fiddler, and the flute player cheered and laughed merrily.

Suddenly, Dwalin rose from his seat so forcefully that his chair toppled over. Swiftly, he approached the musicians, elbowing his way through tall men until he was able to rip the bow from the fiddler's hand and break it in his fist. He threw it in the fireplace and stared them down.

When he spoke, his voice was like thunder, the consonants rolling like a dog's growl.

"If ye play that in here one more time, I'll break yer fingers, punch yer teeth in, and shove that flute up yer arse so ye'll never sing, play, or even whistle for yer bleedin' dog ever again in yer miserable lives."

Hemery had not seen him nearly this livid since that night two years ago when she had stayed out late with a friend from the academy in Tirith—a male friend.

Dwalin was furious and menacing, his forehead reddening, and his massive arms flexed as he pointed at each person to emphasise his words. Sensing trepidation, Kíli and Nori had followed him, but refrained from calming him. In a fight, they would probably have helped him—in the rare instance they thought he needed it.

Even if Dwalin had not scared the trio so badly that they decided to end their performance for the evening, everyone at the tavern knew who Dwalin was. No one doubted he would execute his threat.

Dwalin returned to his seat. Kíli righted his chair, sparing Dwalin the minimal effort of bending to retrieve it. Only a small frown remained on his face as he sat, his rage deflating quickly.

"Dwalin," Hemery began softly, but clear enough to be heard over the noise that had continued around them. "Did you . . . not like the music?" she asked stupidly, completely at a loss.

"Someone recitin' a lewd verse in time with a wavin' fiddlestick is not music."

"We've heard plenty of rude verses in here before without you throwing a fit," Kíli said.

"Well, not all verses include real people," he growled.

Hemery felt as if someone had pushed her under the ice of a frozen lake. She stared at him in disbelief.

"Who was it about?"

Dwalin sighed. Without meeting her eyes, he took a swig of his ale.

"Who was it?" Hemery asked again, louder.

He refused to answer.

"'Tis nothing, Miss Hemery," Balin said instead, shaking his head with a kind smile. "Do not take it as reality of people's opinion. It is merely in jest, though . . . rarely amusing when aimed at
Hemery thought about this. So people talked about her. And about the king. About her and the king. She had thought she was doing something good for the people, that she did it well. But she guessed this was what happened when one stepped out of the shadows and into the court. She herself had made fun of the king long before she knew him. Who was she to judge?

But what if people disapproved of her involvement. She was only a girl of men playing at politics, after all.

She turned to Kíli, speaking in a small voice. "May I have a pint, please?"

"Of course," he replied, surprised.

Dwalin awakened from his own thoughts. "Another," he bellowed, holding his tankard in the air. Some of the remaining ale sloshed out as he did so.

"What's wrong with the one you have?" Kíli asked, glancing at the three quarters left.

Dwalin raised it to his lips and drained the cup in a matter of moments, putting it down with a clank when he was finished. "It's empty," he replied, burping.

"Rule three," Nori said. "Never listen to drunk dwarves."
"I shouldn't be here," Hemery said to Kíli and Fíli as they entered the training area.

"Why ever not?" Kíli asked, propelling her along with a hand on her back when she dawdled at the entrance.

"You've been at the range before, surely?" Fíli said, unbothered by her reluctance.

"Well, yes, but never when the soldiers are here—in groups," she replied as they passed two dwarves in full armour, pummelling each other with hammers so forcefully that she feared something might come flying their way. Hem ducked down a little, instinctively, quickly moving along.

Hemery mostly trained with Dwalin at his house, so she never had any need of going here unless she wanted to do some target practice when the weather was disagreeable. Dwalin strongly objected to such luxuries, claiming that the weather would not turn when danger appeared and that she should be able to grasp a knife or a sword even if her hands were frozen numb.

"It's fine. Just don't look anyone in the eye—they'll see at as a challenge," Kíli said.

"A challenge for what?" Hem asked, wide eyed.

"A fight." Fíli smiled at her, clearly imagining her on one of the hexagonal platforms, facing a war master with an axe and hammer. The platforms meant for sparring were a metre higher than the ground, built thus to evoke incentive to not be pushed by your opponent and fall off.

Hemery swiftly looked away from any passing dwarves, shielding her periphery with one hand, focusing on following Fíli and Kíli. Also to not gawp at the sweat soaking through the thin shirts of the dwarves who were shedding their armour, heading for the saunas at the bathhouse next door.

"Uncle," Fíli called out, catching the attention of two dwarves engaged in combat on a hexagon. Thorin and Steig—one of Thorin's personal guards.

Rather than pausing, Thorin merely glanced at the visitors before continuing the session, barely distracted as he spoke.

"The directives have been given—we leave at first light," he stated, seemingly to Fíli, though it did not stop him from executing a series of offensive strikes with his sword and quickly moved away when attacked in return.

"I know," Fíli said. "But we need to have words still."

"I have said all I have to say on the matter," Thorin bit out. "I'm going, and that is final." Whether the terse tone was annoyance at the conversation or exertion from keeping his opponent at bay was difficult to tell.

"Yet I have not, Uncle," Fíli said. He was not intimidated by the king's gruff attitude. It was something Hemery admired about Fíli, but she would never admit it of course.

"I agreed to stay here," Fíli went on, "while you and Kíli venture on this pilgrimage, but I require that Miss Hemery accompany you."
"Out of the question," Thorin replied instantly, not even looking their way as swords clashed. It looked more like they competed in raw strength rather than disarmament.

"She knows the location, the people, the town," Fíli said. "She would be an asset."

Hemery said nothing. She did not know how much help she would be in that respect; she had not set foot in Blackwater for ten years, being no more than a child when she left.

Thorin beat back his opponent with one final powerful blow, forcing Steig off the platform to land heavily on his stiff armour.

"Victory acknowledged," Steig groaned to formally end the session. "Very good, Sire." He awkwardly came to his feet, rigidly making his way over to a bench to remove his armour.

Thorin nodded to Steig, then turned to Fíli. "I'm not having this conversation," he said. He did not seem pleased by the victory. His shoulders were still tense, as if on guard. He stepped off the platform, moving to the bench where he kept his sword sheath.

"Evidently." Fíli followed him. "But I am. I insist Hemery goes with you."

Thorin ignored him, scrutinising his sword, running a thumb along the edge to check for damage.

Fíli stepped closer, speaking low but clearly. "Relations have never been less predictable with Blackwater. How can we have the slightest idea of what to expect, what kind of reception you'll get?"

"We are simply concerned neighbours, investigating the devastating fire," Thorin said smoothly, smirking at Steig who stood near, unlacing a pauldron. Steig laughed at Thorin's obvious jest—or lie, whichever one preferred.

"Only they won't see it that way," Hemery said, unable to keep quiet when she realised how much Thorin relished the chance to confront Brage. "You're not goin' to repair diplomatic ties or lend a helpin' hand—you're seekin' revenge."

"If I wanted vengeance, I would send Steig to poison them in their sleep, not ride into town to knock on their front door," Thorin mocked.

"I don't believe you've waited ten years just to be friends with them again," Hemery mimicked his derision.

"Ten years is no time to wait if I attain what I crave."

"To me, it's an eternity," Hemery said, thinking of how everything had changed for her in only five years. "A lot can happen in ten years."

Thorin took a step toward her. "And what if the worst was to happen? Suppose there will be violence. You have no place in my army. I will not be responsible for your safety outside this mountain." His words were flat, his eyes cold.

Hemery wanted to knock him on the head with the handle of his own sword. Did he not get it? "My presence is meant to prevent open conflict."

"But if you cannot?" he persisted. Thorin seemed to count on it.

Hemery sighed. Count on dwarves to anticipate a fight with such fervour. She was glad Dwalin had
taught her all he knew about defence before moving on to offense. Despite the extensive training he had given her in how to wield blades, she had only been allowed to practice with a real sword a few times. But she knew she could survive if nothing else.

She put her hands on her hips, shoulders back like Dwalin always said, making her as tall as she could. "Don't worry about me. I can hold my own," she said.

Thorin's eyes pierced her like steel, unflinching. Could he see how much she doubted her own words?

"Is that so?" Steig snorted, seemingly amused by the juxtaposition of her confident words and her unimpressive frame.

Hemery folded her arms. She was not letting herself be goaded into an arm wrestling match or something equally silly with a seasoned warrior. "Miss Hem's been trained by Dwalin himself," Kíli said to her defence. Hem snapped her eyes to glare at him. Kíli was not helping. "Oh," Steig said in feigned awe. "Well, in that case . . . Care to show evidence of this thorough 'training'?"

"I don't care to make a spectacle on the king's trainin' grounds," she replied, clenching her jaws. "Because you're afraid you'll not hold up so well against a real warrior of the king's army?"

Hemery fumed. How dare he insult Dwalin to her face? Fíli and Kíli said nothing, probably intrigued by the idea of witnessing Hemery's skills. They had never seen her fight, after all, and they viewed any brawl as entertainment. Thorin said nothing. But she refused to swallow the bait. "No," Hem contradicted with thin patience. "It's because I think you're tryin' to provoke me so I'll provoke you back, givin' you a reason to exclude me from your little excursion."

She glared at Steig and then at Thorin who stood by, watching them with forced nonchalance. She could tell he held back a smirk. "It won't work," she said emphatically.

Thorin controlled his features when he spoke, taking a formal stand in the conversation. "You are excused from any representative duties at this time and are under no obligation to join me on this journey. I know you have work that needs your undivided attention."

He still did not get it. Hemery put more force behind her words. "I'm not doin' it out of obligation to the crown. I'm doin' it because I want to, and it is the will of the princes and the princess."

"To be fair," Fíli said, "Hanah did request to join you, but you turned her down. She knows Lady Brage better than anyone and is the person who last had any contact with her personally. If she's concerned, I'm concerned."

Thorin regarded him without attempting to interject or argue. They had talked this all through before, it seemed. Fíli sighed, as if giving up trying to convince Thorin. Fíli took a step back, raising his chin, adopting a lofty expression.
"I'm informing you as a courtesy, Uncle," he said. "Either Hemery goes, or I go."

Thorin glowered at that, disliking ultimatums and disliking the idea of Fíli going near the people who almost had him killed.

"She'll be my travelling companion," Kíli said. "I'll answer for her safety."

"Indeed," Thorin drawled unimpressed, picking up his holsters. He turned to leave. "I'm getting cleaned up. I want your lot gone when I return. You'd better hurry to ready yourselves for dinner. Dis is in a right state, trying to gather us before we depart."

With those words, Thorin left. Hemery, Fíli, and Kíli looked at each other.

Fíli shrugged. "I guess you're going," he said, clapping Hem on the back. It was meant to be friendly, but it almost took he wind out of her.

"She's a twig," Steig said. "Doesn't matter who trained her—she'll not last five heartbeats in a fight."

Hemery lunged at him, slamming her palms hard against the dwarf's ears, creating a hard pressure against his eardrums, a painful distraction as it gave her time to shift and hit his larynx with the side of her flat hand, making him choke. These pains were temporary, just enough to make her point as she lastly aimed a kick with her heel to the back of his knee, causing him to fall to his knees, clutching his neck, coughing.

Hemery leaned forward, but stayed out of reach. "I could've taken out your knee, but I chose not to," she said loudly since she suspected his ears would be ringing pretty badly.

She straightened, smoothing out her skirts. She was happily surprised how easy she could move in the long dress. Fíli and Kíli just stared at her—Fíli stunned, Kíli failing to suppress his gleeful laughter.

Only then did Hem realise what it looked like. A slip of a girl taking down a dwarf, like a mouse biting the tail of a boar. Some of the other dwarves in the area took notice, but not all. An armoured dwarf falling over in this room was not an unusual occurrence. They looked like they did not really believe their eyes, or they shared Fíli's and Kíli's reaction.

Suddenly, Hemery felt a flash of dread. Perhaps she should not have done that to Thorin's personal guard?

"Dwalin would never have fallen for that," she said in her defence.

Kíli let out unrestrained laughter. Fíli smiled crookedly.

"Let's get you out of here before you incapacitate Thorin's entire army," Fíli said, ushering her towards the exit. He did not seem terribly upset. Hemery breathed out, relieved. She needed to keep her temper in better control, she thought. But surrounded by dwarves, this had never been easy.

"How many heartbeats was that?" Kíli asked, curious.

Apparently, Dis had a tradition of gathering all of her family and their closest friends before any significant event, such as her brother and son going off to an uncertain fate in the East, for example.
This meant she summoned the king, her sons, Hanah, Hemery, and the entire company of ten dwarves that were present at the reclaiming of Erebor thirty years ago. Since there was no limit in drinking at these late dinners, Híli had already had her supper and stayed in her room.

Dis claimed it would bring Thorin and Kíli luck on their journey to have been around all the people who kept them safe through previous perils. This included Dwalin whom Hemery was surprised, but glad, to see appear in the large dining room. Dis had chosen the bigger room, not only to fit everybody, but also taking the opportunity to dine in style in grander surroundings.

Dwalin was extremely uncomfortable. He looked like he had just been told they were having vegetarian cuisine this evening. Hemery knew he was not looking forward to seeing the king, and she had no idea of what nature his relationship with Dis was at the moment. She did not think they had seen much of each other since Hem and Dwain returned from Tirith, but were clearly not going to go out of their way to catch up during the evening, so to speak.

Dwalin was strategically placed as far away from Thorin as possible. Hemery sat next to him, and Kíli, Fíli, and Hanah on the other side. Fortunately enough little was said during dinner of the travel plans for the next morning, except for some queries from the uninvited members of the company as to when they planned to return. Kíli and Balin tried to sound untroubled and confident, though they could not give any estimation other than "a week or two."

Hemery was surprised again when Dwalin did not speak at all, not even commenting on her choice to go with them. She wondered whether he actually respected her decision so much that he would let it rest or if he would explode at any moment.

Attempting to change the subject, Fíli asked how the latest court proceedings fared for Hemery.

"Did you floor them with your unexpected manoeuvres?" he teased, imitating a punch to the throat toward Kíli who in turn gripped his ears as if in great pain.

Their vulgar portrait of Steig from a few hours ago did not amuse Hemery. Fíli always asked about the court proceedings, though he knew perfectly well their results, because he was aware of how insecure she was at every summons.

"Please," Hanah groaned exasperated. "No wrestlin' at the table, you two." She had seen too many dishes broken and meals spoiled by their unchecked behaviour. This was why they rarely were allowed to sit next to each other at dinner anymore.

Fíli left his brother alone only to kiss Hanah's cheek. She ignored him, trying to continue eating, but did not deny him either. Unbothered, Fíli turned back to Hem, expectantly.

"I think I put words together well enough to get my point across," Hemery replied modestly, but glared, willing him to not ask anymore about it.

"Miss Hemery shone with brilliance, as always," Balin said, smiling.

"You're too kind," she replied into her cup.

"Pity that is not all that is said about Hem's role in the council rooms," Dwalin remarked.

Hemery looked up sharply. Dwalin was looking deliberately at Thorin who seemed unaware of the conversation at the other end of the table.

What in Mahal's bloody name was Dwalin doing?
"Dwalin," Hanah spoke with the same tone used for Híli when she spoke with her mouth full. "Now is not the time." She looked at Dwalin with raised eyebrows, silently questioning his sanity.

"Now's the perfect time," he said, speaking louder now. "I'd think ye'd agree she should not be put in situations where her dignity and intentions are constantly questioned. It's not right."

At that, Thorin's head rose from his meal, finding Dwalin's gaze. Hanah leaned an elbow on the table, half-covering her mouth worriedly. She knew she could not stop it now.

"And you, Mister Dwalin, would be an authority on decency, I take it," Thorin replied lazily and sarcastically.

Dwalin turned red, but kept himself in check. Hemery knew it was a great effort on his part.

"This is not about me," he ground out.

Hemery's eyes widened, full of horror of what might be said in heat and old anger. She did not dare intervene, probably because she knew all things said were true, and to some extent she agreed with Dwalin. And Hem was curious to know if the king had been aware of the gossip.

However, of all the people to bring up the issue before the king, hoping for some kind of solution to the problem, Dwalin was the least likely to succeed. And everyone in the room knew it.

Hemery placed her hand on Dwalin's arm, pressing her fingertips into his flesh, willing him to stop speaking. He did not oblige her.

"Even your half-trained guards and sleepin' advisors cannot have missed what is being said about the king's procedures," he said.

"You allow your brother too little credit," Thorin jabbed intentionally, knowing full well the advisors Dwalin spoke of did not include Balin. "I know that no sensible person should listen to loose talk from malcontents." Thorin was very calm in the face of Dwalin's inquiry.

So he had known? Was that was he was saying?

"And the vicious slander among the conservative families of the kingdom about a witch who has the king under her thumb—should that be tolerated?" Dwalin's booming voice rose further.

Thorin's face darkened, clenching his fists on the armrests of his chair.

Balin got up quietly from his seat to approach the serving staff who were busy at the other end of the room. With not so much as a whisper reaching the seated party, he thanked them for their services for the evening and that they may leave the dining hall. Balin remained there, near the doors, probably to be prepared to call guards if an altercation were to take place. Vigilant as ever.

"I will not dignify such absurd claims with an address, no matter who utters it." Thorin's voice was pure venom. "I administer the royal audiences as I see fit, and I answer to no one."

"With no thought to who suffers under yer administration?" Dwalin challenged.

Hemery felt as if she was about to cry, but she was too afraid. She started to sweat as her heart beat frantically in her chest.

"Will you shut up," she hissed to Dwalin, digging short nails into his arm.

She had thought a lot about what she had heard the evening before, about the jokes on her expense
for her involvement at court, but she had tried to ignore it. She did not want it to taint her deeds or alter Thorin's perception of her. No matter how exhausted she might be, and no matter how much time and effort he asked of her—without actually asking, mind—she would not refuse him. It was not his fault people were insensitive lard-bags whose only source of amusement was mocking others.

Thorin was taxed by long hours and the heavy burden of his crown; she wanted to relieve him in any way she could. If her counsel could aid in his predicaments or amuse him for the briefest of moments, she would continue to offer it. If he paid mind to the rumours and opinions flourishing around them and decided to not summon her anymore, she feared their bond—whatever it was—would dissolve.

"No one has openly questioned Hem's presence in any mediations," Fíli interjected in an attempt to prevent bloodshed during his, thus far, pleasant dinner. "Neither can anyone present evidence that her advice is anything other than genuine and sound."

He shrugged, trying to seem indifferent to the tense atmosphere, but Hemery could tell by the way he avoided his uncle's eye that his words were merely one side of the truth. Just because none made official complaints did not mean the issue was irrelevant.

But Thorin ignored him.

"If Miss Hemery is displeased with her situation, I have yet to hear of it." Thorin's dark gaze turned to her now. "She may, of course, be released from any sense of duty towards Erebor forever, if indeed that is her wish."

The room fell into an oppressive hush while all in attendance waited for her reply.

Hemery cleared her throat, stalling a moment, searching for whatever words would offend Thorin the least, while still being truthful.

"I am not displeased," she managed with a dry tongue. "But I cannot deny that these unfavourable reports have reached me as well. Some quite . . . unnervin'." She could feel blood rush to her cheeks as she thought of the accusations of her seducing the king to gain power over him. And the worst ones, pushed to the extreme, in which she had Thorin submit with a spell or drug him to have him act as her puppet, in the throne room as well as the bedroom.

She continued, hating the waver in her voice.

"I understand how things might seem outwardly, and I fear . . . sometimes . . . that the king's decisions, however sensible, will be perceived as weaker after I have spoken for no other reason than that I am a woman. It makes me very . . . uncomfortable."

Hemery hated being forced to say these things in front of witnesses, even if they were his family. She knew it made Thorin's skin thicken and his hackles rise, and no good would come of this evening. She glanced at Thorin, but could not bear the weight of his stare.

No sound was made in the room. All had stopped eating and drinking long ago to observe the exchange, and tension rose. Bofur's brow furrowed as he regarded her apologetically. Nori looked shocked, as if he could not believe his luck to be present at the time of reckoning. Kíli clenched his jaws tightly, his big, brown eyes miserable as he watched the exchange between Hemery and Thorin. Fíli looked down, seemingly at a loss, gripping his goblet in one large fist and Hanah's hand in the other. They could have been praying together had it not been for Hanah's keen stare at Thorin, as if daring him to say anything against her sister.
"I must say I'm surprised at you, Miss Skinner." Thorin's voice was deceivingly calm. "I expected your integrity to not be so easily penetrable by feeble minds. But perhaps I should have realized your failure to grasp the power of constancy over leniency."

"Uncle," Fíli was quick to warn, as if asking Thorin if he really wished to pursue this topic.

But Thorin's words made no sense to Hemery. "What do you mean?"

"You're not accusing her of being disloyal, are you?" Dis asked, baffled.

"He would not dare," Dwalin threatened.

"She left," Thorin stated with a bark. "I will not be blamed for wishing to reassert her devotion to Erebor."

Reassert? Hemery blanched at the word.

She had never been a citizen, as such. She was not born in Erebor, nor had she lived there very long. She had been in Dale, Esgaroth, and Erebor for four years before she journeyed to Minas Tirith. Her service to the king was not because of some duty to the crown, but a kinship with Thorin and his family. She did not care about Erebor—she cared about him. And doubt was her thanks.

"Have you been testin' me?" she asked, incredulous. "Is that why you have called for me day and night since I got back?"

Was she to atone for her transgression and, if she rose to his standards, be forgiven for her absence in order to re-establish his good will towards her? Was he disciplining her like a dog?

"You dwelled in the south longer than you stayed here. Given your past, you would have more than sufficient time to nestle your way into the royal family of any kingdom," his voice had turned easy and unbothered again, as if he was merely bored by the discussion. "And I could not care less about how you appear in the eyes of others—as a witch, troll, or siren—for they know nothing of your character, nor do they have any power to judge. They are of no consequence. You, however, should know better than to be swayed in your convictions and not overlook the respect my people have for loyalty and perseverance. I suppose knowing some Khuzdul does not make you an expert on our society."

Hemery felt as if she had been struck in the face. She stared at him as he finished, concluding his speech by a determined set of his jaw, belying his cool demeanour.

How did he know she knew Khuzdul unless he had read the book she brought—her book—where she analysed its significance for dwarven kind? Her worst fear had been realized; he had inspected her work on dwarven culture and disapproved, utterly and completely. And when he tested her loyalty in the wake of his disappointment, she had failed. By not stoically withstanding the weight of his demands, as well as the horrible accusations and rumours, she was not worthy.

Dwalin rose suddenly.

"No," Dis exclaimed, her hand slamming on the table, looking between her brother and Dwalin, as if stopping both of them in their spiral.

Dwalin froze, halted in motions. As if deliberating his actions and intentions, his eyes flew from Thorin to Dis, from Dis to Hem.
Hemery looked back up at him from her seat. She did not want him to challenge Thorin. It would solve nothing. Dwalin could not defend her honour here.

Hem took his hand, squeezing it. He sighed, seemingly deflating. He pushed back his chair, brushed her head with his hand, before leaving with heavy, angry steps.

If only she had not heard that stupid song at the Dragon's Head. But Hemery's regret was not wholehearted. She would not live in ignorance for anything.

She did not know what to say. Her face burned as hot as her emotions. She was furious and devastated. She had tried so hard to do the right thing, navigating the social conduct of dwarves and men, but had failed anyway.

At that moment, Hanah rose and came round the table. She took Hemery's elbow and gently, but not condescendingly, helped her from her seat. Hemery was glad of it, her shaking hand gripping Hanah's tightly.

"Hem—"

It was Thorin, his voice low and less heated than a moment ago. She turned her head to him. He stood as well. It seemed he wanted to say something, but Hanah interrupted him.

"That is quite enough for one evenin'. Don't you think so, Your Highness?"

Hemery went with Hanah, leaving the dining hall. Balin followed through the large doors.

"You mustn't be discouraged, Miss Hemery," he said, patting her shoulder. "We all know he can sound a bit rough, though I don't rightly know what's come over him tonight."

"Nobles rarely say what they mean or mean what they say, right?" Hemery managed a dry smile at the old dwarf. He returned it.

"Something like that, Miss," he agreed.

"Don't worry, Mister Balin," she said. "Dwarven tempers have not frightened me for several years."

He chuckled at that, comforted in her resilience—or her attempt at it, in any case.

"Good night, Balin," Hanah bid.
The sisters moved in silence to Hemery's chambers. As soon as Hanah had closed and locked the door behind them, Hemery sat down heavily in a chair by the fire. She covered her eyes with one hand, resting her elbows on her knees. She did not cry, not yet, but her eyes burned.

She sighed, shaking her head in frustration.

Hanah kneeled on the floor in front of her, stroking her arms.

"He is completely in the wrong, of course," Hanah began, as if they had been discussing the merchant who over-charged Hemery for sheepskins last week. "Though I'll not say he didn't mean it."

Hemery groaned, but Hanah continued.

"You know it wasn't you who angered him enough to say those things. Dwalin always manages to push Thorin where he least wants to go, remindin' him of what people are sayin' about him, and about you. He can't make them stop, and he can't make it easier for you to bear. He hates the lack of control, that's all."

Hemery looked at her then. Her red, wretched eyes pleaded with her sister.

"But he's right. I shouldn't care what they think," said Hemery.

Thorin was right about dwarves respecting loyalty more than anything. If only she had held fast to her resolve to help him make fair decisions for the kingdom and its people, they may have seen eventually that her purpose was good and honest, though she could not fathom the time it might have taken them to arrive at such a conclusion. Dwarves were stubborn as stone, after all.

"You are just one person," Hanah said forcefully. "You don't ask for their opinions, but they'll give them anyway. You didn't ask for Thorin's trust, yet he gave it to you."

Hanah opened her eyes fully, staring at her sister, drawing out her doubt, silently demanding Hem to take in her words. It seemed she was speaking from experience.

Hanah gripped Hemery's shoulders. "You have to find a way through all those expectations that are placed on you whether you want them or not, and decide what is best for you. Don't carry it simply because you hope it will please anyone else, least of all Thorin. You cannot fulfil them all—it's impossible. Trust me."

Hemery thought about this. Hanah was right, of course. She was always right.

"Did you know?" Hem asked suddenly.
"Know what?"

"What people were sayin'? Did you know all along?" Hem felt strange. Had Hanah lied to her? She did not know what to think about that.

"Sigrid told me, maybe a month ago," Hanah replied truthfully. Hem frowned but did not remove herself from Hanah's gentle hands.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because I knew this would happen," Hanah said softly. "If you would continue to aid Thorin, I thought you'd gain more confidence to be better prepared for it. And the longer you'd be spared from those horrid whispers, the better. So I didn't tell you."

Hem looked down in her lap, pursing her lips in disgruntled thought.

"They're just words," Hanah said. "They're not swords or axes or torches. Just words."

But words could be as sharp as blades, Hemery reflected silently.

"What made Thorin speak so harshly tonight?" Hanah asked Fíli while she undressed in their bedroom.

"Who knows?" Fíli shrugged, his uncle's actions a mystery even to him. "Perhaps his steak was over cooked. And Dwalin did not help matters."

Hanah nodded, thoughtful.

"You know from what he said now I believe he might have taken serious offence to Hemery leavin' for so long. But he never gave us any reason to think he disapproved so strongly. To think he found her disloyal? It's beyond belief." Hanah was thoroughly confused. "Did he ever say anythin' to you?"

"No, nothing. He's always been short-tempered, but I thought it was the pressure of the work. I've tried to aid him as much as I can, but nothing really makes a difference to his mood. Being idle worsens it, if anything."

As Hanah loosened her hair, Fíli came up behind her and picked up her comb. Making her sit down, he slowly and carefully made her hair free from braids, knots, and waves. After a thoughtful moment, he spoke.

"I noticed he seemed to make her a favourite ever since you first moved into the mountain. He always took the time to listen to her and even took advice from her." He smiled at Hanah in the mirror in front of her. "Though she was but a crude, insolent little thing."

"Watch your mouth, m'lord," Hanah said.

Fíli was not put off, only held back her hair to place a kiss on her neck. She did not stop him. He resumed his combing, though it was more for his own pleasure than for her benefit.

"Never would I have imagined it would come to this," he said, bemused. He suspected the dynamics in Thorin and Hemery's relationship had shifted since she returned, but he was not sure. He had chosen not to dwell on it until tonight. The talk about Hemery seducing him, or Thorin seducing her—whatever people were saying—did not help.
"It was your idea," she said in her sister's defense.

"What?" Fíli was abruptly roused from his musings.

"She only did what you recommended—to go out into the world and educate herself."

"Oh." Fíli's brow knotted, wondering if she misunderstood his meaning, but decided to drop it and bring a lighter mode to the conversation. "Well, that may be so, but she's the one who told our secrets to the world and brought the king's wrath on herself. The last untouched treasure of our people flaunted for all men to see."

"Yes, poor you. You have no treasures left whatsoever," Hanah scoffed sarcastically. "It was one book which is now safe in your own library. Get over the violation of your sacred privacy."

"Well, who has to suffer the king's bad mood in the morning? I do."

Hanah smiled. Despite his show of being the masculine dwarf who took care of everyone around him and handled every problem, Fíli had no scruples about playing the martyr when it suited him.

"He'll have to get over it, as well, or the whole kingdom will suffer. He'll not go two weeks without consultin' her, no matter what kind of abandonment issues he might be strugglin' with. Five years aren't that much to a dwarf, is it?" She looked to him for assurances.

Fíli lay down the comb and proceeded to undress.

"Five years are still five years. I thought she'd go to the Iron Hills or Ered Luin, not bloody Gondor," he said, wrestling out of his shirt. "I thought Dwalin would take her to meet some good people, learn a new fishing hook or two. Not go to university and produce our culture to the scholars of Minas Tirith."

He pulled off his boots and chucked them into a corner. "I just wanted her to get some fresh air and for us to—"

He stopped himself mid-sentence.

"We would what?" Hanah asked apprehensively.

Fíli drew his hands through his thick mane and sighed. "That we could have some time alone together."

She smiled crookedly, finding it sweet how upset he was that his plans for intimacy with her had backfired.

"I love them all to bits," he vowed, "but there's always so many people around. My brother in my study, or Hem in your work shop, or Híli in our chambers—in our bed." He sat heavily on the bed. "I just wanted you to myself for a little while."

Hanah approached the dwarf, resting her hands on his head. He embraced her middle, pressing his face to her stomach through her shift.

"We've shared the same bed, the same meals, and the same evenin's, every day for nine years. I thought you'd be sick of me by now," Hanah spoke lightly, threading her fingers through his hair.

Fíli's warm hands caressed her back, down over her hips to the swell of her buttocks where they stayed, squeezing lightly. "Not for along while yet," he murmured against her.
"Then you won't mind if I finish gettin' ready for bed as you hold that thought?" she asked, knowing it would be received with protests.

Fíli did not let go when she attempted to step back. "You are ready for bed," he said, sneaking his hands under her shift. "I'll make sure of it."

In the middle of their intimate caresses, just as he had pleasured her with his hands and mouth, he looked at her, completely relaxed and leisurely in their bed. There was not quite a smile on her face, but a serenity of a person who was just waking after a good night's sleep, but had no need to rise.

He was dropping slow kisses on her skin when he said, "Marry me, love."

She chuckled, as she was used to doing when he uttered sentimentalities in his aroused state. Once in a while, he would ask her to marry him—often when her mouth was on his manhood. Was it any wonder it amused her?

"To what point and purpose? I already get everythin' I need from you."

"Don't laugh," he said, but not without a hint of mirth in his own voice before he silenced her mouth with his lips. "I'm serious," he maintained between his kisses.

"No, you're not," she managed through his assault, having a harder time keeping back her laughter. "You can never be serious when your cock has more of your attention than your reason."

"Mmm—no, you have my attention." He moved down to lick and lightly bite her neck, while his lower half pressed against her thigh. "But keep going—I love hearing you say such words."

She was starting to tingle again from his touch, but she would not budge.

"If you ask me in the middle of love makin', I'll never agree. I think you know that, which is why you only ask me at times like these. You don't really want me to say yes. You just like the way it sounds."

"What if I want another child?" He moved to lavish her breast with a soft, hot tongue, but would not release her from his questioning. "Then this would be an excellent time to ask."

Hanah suspected he was trying to provoke her or tire her resistance by raising the issue in bed, forcing a yielding result from her. Similarly to her own strategy of asking him questions when he was falling asleep, triggering a yes from him whatever the issue might be in order to be allowed to sleep in peace.

"Are you sure?" she asked. "There would be even less time for us. Cries wakin' us in the night. More people in and out of our chambers. What if it was a son this time? Can you imagine tryin' to raise a small Fíli? It would be a nightmare."

He laughed lightly against her skin, and playfully scraped his teeth on a nipple.

"Oh, you are only making me more inclined to have one."

"Liar."

Fíli could hear the smile in her voice.

"All I ask . . . " he began more solemn, "is that you to leave the parcel on your nightstand alone for
Hanah stilled. She knew what he meant, of course—the herbs she brewed to stop her from conceiving. She had never told him about them, nor had she actively kept it from him. It had been a favour from Sigrid. Hanah would not ask Elín to give her something like that; she knew the healer found life too sacred.

Híli had been an accident—a happy one, but an accident all the same. Hanah was apprehensive about bringing more half-dwarves to this world. Despite her words to Hemery about doing what she wanted for her own good, Hanah admitted to herself that she was guilty of bowing to the conventions of Erebor time and time again. She was not ashamed of her relation with Fíli or their daughter, but painfully aware of the suffering Híli would ultimately go through as she lived a long life in the dwarven kingdom.

One day she might bear the weight of the crown—provided that the people of Erebor found her fit to rule. Hanah knew she was not responsible for others' actions and could not answer for their treatment of her child, but she felt the guilt of it anyway. Guilt for all the things that Híli had not yet endured, for the doubt and the abuse she would be subjected to as a female, half-dwarf leader.

She found herself thinking that if they would have another child, she hoped it would be another girl. She could not deny the logic that a male half-blood would have an easier life. However, if Híli had a younger brother, she might be tempted to leave the crown to him to spare herself the burden, but the prejudice would be confirmed that a female leader was a weak leader. For the same reason, she might also feel pressured to keep the crown, despite its weight which would undoubtedly be heavier on her head than a brother's, just to prove to herself she could manage it, but having to prove herself over and over again until her untimely death after a life of servitude, self-doubt, and torment.

So Hanah hoped for a girl to provide Híli with the sisterhood she had herself enjoyed with Hemery, to share the burden and the joy together, and being stronger because of it.

"Why do you hesitate, love?" Fíli broke her train of thought. She found him regarding her, concerned, and maybe a bit hurt.

She also hesitated for the same reason she would not marry him.

Hanah placed her hand on his cheek, feeling the bristles of his beard and the smoothness of his cheek. He was so much older than her, but she could not tell by looking at him, except for the depth of his eyes and the small lines framing them. She would grow old as well, but as opposed to Fíli, her body would weaken, break, and die much sooner than his. She did not wish to bind him to her for the rest of her life if he would only want her and share a dignified life for a small part of that time, and he would go on living a hundred years or more after she was gone. He might even outlive their daughter. She did not wish that for him. She loved him too much.

"Nothin'," she assured, managing a smile. "I'll give you another child since you ask so nicely." She tried to lighten the mood, but he was not fooled.

"Only if you wish it as well," his gaze was unrelenting, searching her face for clues of her thoughts. Here she did not need to pretend. She nodded. "Of course I do. I'm just worried, that's all. About what they might suffer because of what and who they are."

"I know." He smiled understandingly. "But have you seen Híli? She's the happiest person I know, loved by all, and cleverer than I was at her age." He snorted in self-deprecation.
"Well, it's not difficult to beat you in that contest," she teased, and kissed him before he could utter his resentment at the joke. With one hand around a braid and the other on his shoulder, she pushed him to lie back on the bed, Hanah on top of him.

His noises of protest soon turned to groans of pleasure as she gently rubbed her softest parts against his most sensitive.

At dawn, Hemery lay in bed, wide awake, staring at the bag Sethie had packed for a journey she would not be making.

Was it over now? Would Thorin not summon her anymore? Would she go back to being only a leather smith? Not that she did not enjoy it, but she had seen a glimpse of something more this winter. Something exciting. That she could do everything she wanted without having to give any part of her life up. That she could have it all. And now it was over.

Thus goes the road of men, Hanah always said. Quick turns, up and down. Hemery turned over, burrowing deeper in her quilts and furs, hiding from the unjust world.

Then she got angry with herself and threw off the blankets, sitting up in bed. She had promised Hanah, damn it. And Fíli, Kíli, and Dis. She would go anyway, even if she had to walk the whole way on foot—she did not care. Thorin could not stop her.

That would show them resilience. A loyal friend should know when she is needed, even if the recipient might not.

Hemery had pulled on a pair of leather trousers, good for riding as well as walking, when there was a knock on the door.

Was it Thorin? Her heart skipped a beat. No one else would come knocking at this hour, except Fíli on the few occasions when Hanah was ill. Perhaps it was Kíli, coming to make sure she was still going with them—or he was sent to make sure she did not.

Quickly, she threw on a linen tunic over her bare torso, not bothering to tie back her hair, letting it fall how it may in unkempt tresses over her shoulders. More knocking, harder this time, banged on her door before she opened it. Hemery almost had to hop aside when Thorin pushed past her into the room.

Did he do the same to his family or Balin? Was this what happened when you acknowledged the king's power—he treated your chambers like his own?

Without a word, he paced a few steps back and forth, not looking at her, restlessly or uncertain, until he came to stand in front of the window like last time. He was dressed for travel, a thick cloak with brown fur hung from his shoulders, making him much wider than usual.

When he did not speak, Hemery became nervous. Was he gathering his breath for more bile?

"Shouldn't you be preparin' for your trip, Sire?" she asked.

He did not answer, as if immersed in the view of the stars fading in the brightening, dark blue sky.

Hemery folded her arms, glancing down at her feet. She should have put shoes on before getting the door, or at least socks.

"I saw Bain yesterday," Thorin said, hoarsely.
Hem raised her head, bewildered. He was just going to ignore their last conversation? Really?

"I know you disapprove of the low number I take with me today," he continued, "and I do too."

"Then why don't you take more?" she asked, shrugging.

"Bain refuses to supply me with the horses I ask for, and the journey will take too long on foot."

It dawned on her that Bain and Thorin were still having problems. Bain was not letting go of the issue she had tried to solve. "He wanted you to lower the trade tax in return, didn't he?" Hem guessed.

Thorin turned to meet her eyes then. There was none of the ice from last night, only exhaustion.

"He wants something I cannot give him," he said regretfully. He clenched and unclenched a fist at his side. "We need to leave as soon as possible, so we'll take fifty horses from the small stables we have up here."

Hemery nodded. "You're doin' the right thing. If you give in to his demand, you'll have to do the same for everyone."

"Mm," he huffed in agreement. He looked down, sighing, resting one hand on the windowsill. He was not happy with the arrangements, she could tell.

"I don't know how I allowed things get so out of hand," he said suddenly.

Hem frowned. In what way? With Bain? With dinner? With Blackwater?

"With everything," he explained without being asked, surprising her.

Her jaw slackened. Did that mean what she thought it meant?

"You do know," she began carefully, barely daring to hope for an apology, "that I never wanted to abuse your trust or betray Erebor in any way?"

He shook his head, holding up a hand to stop her. Did he not believe her?

"What I said was true," he maintained.

Hemery stiffened, annoyance rising in her chest. Did he come just to insult her again?

"Those thoughts were seeds of weakness, entering my mind at one time or another during the last few years," he went on. "However . . . this was before I realised you were willing to risk your life for Erebor by volunteering to return to Blackwater."

He looked at her, his features softer than she had seen in five years. There was humility there, she realised, daunting in its unfamiliarity.

Was that an apology? The confession that he had once doubted her but did not anymore? And was she only forgiven because she would sacrifice herself for Erebor?

It was Hemery's turn to look away, focusing on the last embers in the fireplace.

"I didn't do it for the kingdom," she said. "It's the right thing to do. This Brage thing has to go away."
She could feel his eyes on her, anticipating more.

"And because I care. About you . . . and Kíli," she was quick to add, tightening her folded arms.

"But we are one. We are Erebor, always will be."

"I'm beginning to see that," Hem said, frustrated, running her fingers through her hair, pushing it back, out of her face as she straightened to meet Thorin's gaze. "There's always a shadow attached to every brightly polished pillar in this place. King and court is no different." She pursed her lips.

She did not care if he took offense. She would keep insulting him even if she tried not to, might as well be honest. If she did insult him, he did not show it this time. He only looked as tired as she felt, but was probably more so considering his position, his duty, and his experience. Hem was already fed up with people, and she was only twenty-two.

Thorin moved to the fire, sitting down in one of the chairs there. He motioned for her to join him. When she did not move, he gave her a pointed look.

"If you please . . .?" he said.

Hemery refrained from rolling her eyes. Typical of him to only ask sarcastically. She sat down in the opposite chair.

"I do not ask permission to enter when I come to your door, nor when I sit down in your chambers, because it is not my impression that you object," he said with his royal tone of entitlement, but continued in a soft rumble. "I believe I am welcome to share your fire, always, as you are welcome to share mine."

He spoke like she was his kin, like they were equals, but they were not. She did not know what they were, but her heart stuttered.

"Of course, Sire," she said, breathless.

"Don't." He winced, as if she had served him food when he was already achingly full. "Do not call me that."

He did not want her to call him Sire?

Hemery thought about what he said about her being separate from the court, that her opinions were not equal to those of his council. Perhaps he wanted a respite from the constant weight of the crown? Perhaps he wanted, if not to forget, then to not be reminded of his duty all the time? But she had to use his title when she addressed him.

"What else could I call you?" she asked. "It would not be proper for me to use only your name."

He leaned forward with his elbows on his knees, as if in deep thought. He was very close. She could reach out her hand and touch his shoulder if she wanted to.

"I do not care what people think. I thought you didn't either," he said, raising a questioning brow at her. "Although, I have been wrong about many things, it seems."

He kept speaking in riddles, confusing Hemery.

"Was I the only one who didn't know about the horrible things people were sayin' about me?" she asked.
Thorin sighed, watching her from under dark eyebrows. She took that as a yes.

"Though my choice of words were poor, I meant what I said. I do not let idle talk affect me, nor should you, because it will never pass," he said plainly. "We both know it holds no veracity. It cannot touch you. I won't allow it."

Then some ill thought seemed to strike him. His brow furrowed.

"Surely, none has spoken of it to you at court?" he asked.

"No," she assured. Though she wondered if Bain had it in mind when he asked about her and Thorin a few days ago.

Thorin was not convinced. "Hem?"

She shook her head, clasping her hands together in her lap. "No, no one has said anythin' at court. Nothin' to affect official matters."

He frowned, displeased with her vague response. She was not about to tell him about the awkward conversation with Bain or the mortifying song she had heard at The Dragon's Head.

"I realise . . . I was harsh last evening. Frustration and impatience infused my words—still do," Thorin said, taking a deep breath, as if to keep calm. "You must understand, I cannot afford to be influenced by trivialities—because they are trivialities—when governing this kingdom. Compared to financial and social issues, these rumours are nought but dust in the wind. It is merely your . . . damned empathy that clouds your judgement. The individuals that perpetuate these stories, they do not know us," he said, tone soft despite his determined speech. "They have nothing to do with who you are or what you accomplish—nothing."

Hemery felt her eyes tears up, so she looked down. She wanted to believe it. She wanted to ignore the embarrassment that burned in her skin when she recalled the laughter from the tavern. It was like Hanah had said; she had to move past it if she ever wished to step foot out the door and achieve anything ever again.

"Your only crime was performing your duties too well," Thorin said.

Her eyes flew to his, forgetting the unshed tears in her eyes due to the renewed ire in her gut. What now?

He had the gall to flash a brief smile at her frown.

"You draw too much attention to yourself," he explained.

"You drew attention to me. I didn't do nothin'," she snapped.

"In the years I have known you, you have never been able to keep your opinions to yourself. I decided to make use of this trait, and I have never regretted it," Thorin spoke in a low, sincere voice. "Until yesterday when I was foolish enough to be antagonised, speaking from a place of anger and fear rather than solidarity."

Hemery looked away again, not able to stand his entreatying eyes. She had never encountered this version of him before. This soft voice speaking of honesty and humility was stranger than ice and venom, and she had no idea how to respond.

She had known since before Thorin even opened his mouth last night that nothing good would
come of it. He was already under a lot of stress because of his plans to finish the business with Blackwater. And right before he was supposed to leave, he was ambushed by Dwalin and held responsible for whatever agonies Hemery was going through at the time which Thorin had nothing to do with except that he gave her a chance to prove herself at court. A chance she herself had been increasingly grateful for, though it still scared her every day.

Did Hemery forgive him for what he had said? No. But neither could she deny that a lot of what he said was true, however badly phrased it might have been. And if she understood that her own reaction had been much stronger merely because the words were spoken before an audience—and she had lacked the freedom and tools to argue against them—she would never admit it.

She sniffed, blinked away any remnants of tears, and raised her chin. Thorin was still leaning forward, watching her intently. She noticed the light in the room was brighter, the sun coming over the horizon.

"Don't you have a convoy to catch?" she reminded him pragmatically.

"Will you join us?" he countered.

"Yes, whether you like it or not. I'm walkin' if I have to."

He smiled again. "No need for that. I have a horse saved for you."

Oh. That was . . . unexpected. But she would not let him see her gratitude.

"And Bror?" she asked. The guard had too much honour to let her go anywhere without him, even if it was outside Erebor's boundaries.

"Yes, one for Bror as well," he said patiently.

"Good," she said with false confidence, standing. "I'll get dressed and meet you at the gate."

Thorin rose and moved to the door.

Though he had addressed the most important issue of the argument from last night, something still bothered Hemery.

"I just have one more thing to ask," she said before he opened the door. "Did you read my book?"

If he had, she had wanted to know his genuine opinion. If there were inaccuracies or if he merely disapproved of the method or means, she wanted to know.

Thorin turned away, making a show of adjusting his coat over his shoulders. "I do not have time to read every page in that library," was all he said.

That was not a 'no', Hemery thought.
"What would happen if there was a truce?" Hemery asked Kíli as they rode towards Blackwater. It was well after midday, and Hem was tired, bored, and beyond sore. She had not sat on a horse for months, and her backside felt it.

Thorin rode first in the procession with Vannur and Rál. It seemed Steig had stayed home. Hemery and Kíli rode behind them with Bror, and Kíli's guards Sveir and Sunna.

"A truce?" Kíli echoed, as if the word was foreign to him.

"Yeah," Hem said. "If Lady Brage just said 'Sod it, I'm goin' to the south for some sea-bathin' to cure my . . . cramps or somethin'. You can have the ridge. I don't care anymore."

"Cramps?" Kíli snorted.

"Or shakes or nerves or whatever old people complain about," she explained, smirking. "You're old. What ails you, m'lord?"

Kíli actually looked pensive a moment. "Well, I do bear this horrible curse, you see."

"What kind of curse?" she asked, squinting her eyes in disbelief.

"I am just too much fun," he said with a toothy grin.

"Oh, aye. You're a riot," she agreed, nodding unimpressed. "Though I don't think Lady Brage shares your symptoms."

"No, she's a tough, old hag. I doubt she'd ever give it up."

"What are we supposed to do when we get there?"

"They've just suffered a great tragedy. It is our duty to investigate the fire and make sure the town recovers. And if we can lend a hand—not physically, of course, merely moral support—we would naturally be delighted to be of aid. However, if they don't have the resources to mend what is broken, we may convince the citizens that new leadership is needed." He shrugged, as if talking of re-decorating his drawing room.

"And if you're successful?" Hem prodded. "What would change? Could you trust them after everythin'?"

Kíli hesitated and scrunched his face in a grimace, as if he did not really believe they would succeed.

"I'll agree to nothing less than their utter surrender," Thorin said over his shoulder. Hemery sat up
straighter in the saddle. She did not know he could hear them.

"Their renouncement of the mines and the ridge, and banishment," he continued. "They attempted to assassinate a prince of Erebor. Unless they grovel 'til their knees bleed, they'll not escape with their lives."

Hem and Kíli looked at each other.

"I meant the town," she said carefully to Thorin. "You know, in general. The people and their view on dwarves and whatnot."

Thorin said nothing. Hemery guessed his position was still valid.

She added, "But, yeah, sure—you know, fair point there."

"Hold," Thorin called out, raising his hand to stop the convoy.

Hemery reigned in her horse, looking around for the disturbance. Surely, they were not there already?

They had stopped at a fork in the road. From their current path, one road led south downhill and the other north uphill.

Thorin twisted in his saddle to look at Hemery, raising one brow.

"Which way?"

Surprised, she focused on the road ahead. She could not recall many crossroads or alternative paths this near Blackwater. The north road was not as well travelled, judging by the shallow wheel tracks.

"South should lead to the main road into town," she said. "I don't know the north path. Looks quite new."

Hemery wondered what could be further up the ridge.

"It could lead to the old minin' system," she guessed.

"Uncle, permission to investigate," Kíli said.

"Why?" Thorin grumbled. "It's just a pile of rocks. The tunnels collapsed twenty years ago."

"If they're using the road all the way up there, they might be mining again. Could be useful to know whether they found something."

Thorin seemed to think it over, looking up and down the pathways, and then to the sun behind the clouds. Dusk was only a few hours away.

"Very well," he replied. "Meet us outside the south entrance as soon as you can."

Kíli nodded and spurred his horse on. Sveir, Sunna, and Kíli's closest captains followed him, but when Hemery moved to join them, Thorin stopped her.

"Where are you going?"

She looked at him confused. "With Prince Kíli, Sire. I'm his personal companion, remember?"
He frowned.

"I know the hills better than Kíli. We'll be fine," she assured him in a lower voice.

He thought a moment.

"Kíli," Thorin barked.

His nephew stopped the horse in its tracks.

"I'll go," Thorin said. "You lead the way to Blackwater."

Kíli looked between Thorin and Hemery, nodding at last. If he thought it strange that Thorin changed his mind, he did not say.

Thorin rode past him up the north path with Vannur and Rál, but paused where the road turned, looking back at Hemery. He waited for her.

Hemery kicked her horse into a trot, following Thorin uphill, Bror behind her.

The forest grew thinner the further up they went. Boulders blocked the path in several places, forcing the trail to snake like a small stream up the ridge. The wet earth came loose beneath the horses' hooves, making the animals struggle for footing on the steep road. One could hardly call it a road anymore, but it was obvious that carts had been pushed here recently, so they continued.

When they reached the top of a hill, Thorin stopped. Hemery caught up with him to share the view, letting the horse rest a moment.

A large pit gaped raw in the mountainside, as deep as a bell tower was tall—a gash-like wound marring the ground. Small holes in the edges indicated where the mining shafts used to be, but all was dug up, resembling the bottom of a drained lake.

No people worked in the pit, but Hemery could make out tools and carts at one end. Footprints remained in the soft sand around the pit; the place had been abandoned only recently. When the fire broke out, she guessed.

"You think they're minin' again?" she asked rhetorically with a humourless smile.


"It should probably be called just . . . diggin'. Men always prefer to travel the straightest line to their goal," she said, smiling wryly.

"They will bring down the hillside if they keep this up."

Hemery observed their surroundings. Pine forest and soft, sandy earth coating the stone beneath. Through the canopy of the forest below, they could see thin strips of smoke rise to the sky. Blackwater, Hemery realised. It was not far, but the terrain would make the trip long anyhow.

"One cannot violate the earth like this," Thorin claimed, affronted. He turned his horse around, away from the abomination in the pit. "It has to be cared for, carefully mined in narrow tunnels, not disturbing the life around it."

"What about Erebor? I've never seen such big halls anywhere, even above ground," Hem questioned, confused.
"It does little harm at the summit, but the further down you go, the smaller the tunnels. Everyone knows that."

"All dwarves, you should say."

"Goes without saying." Thorin smirked.

"No, it doesn't," Hem insisted, shaking her head.

"Do you always need to contradict everything I say?"

"Yes, Sire."

They did not make it to the south entrance before dark. They had to turn back the way they came and then follow the same path Kíli and the others had taken to the south side of the town. A misty spring rain descended on them as darkness fell, making their clothes damp and cold, and hindered their sight like a soft water spray to their eyes.

"I miss my mountain already," Thorin lamented through the fog.

"The mountain can be equally cold and damp—I miss my fire," Hemery countered.

"There you go again, contradicting me."

"Moan about somethin' worth moanin' about, Sire. Like how this weather will ruin your fur coat."

"You think that bothers me?" He glanced at her from below his hood, but it was too dark to see his expression.

"It should. Fur that thick will take ages to dry, even in front of a fire. Soon it'll start to smell like wet dog, and chillin' you more than the rain."

"'Tis fortunate I did not bring you with us because of your luminous disposition," he rumbled sarcastically.

"You did not bring me anywhere. I came on my own accord."

"Right," Thorin huffed. Hemery did not know if he made fun of her.

A cloaked figure with a burning torch appeared on the path in front of them.

Thorin's horse reared, making the others stop abruptly.

"State your purpose, stranger," Thorin called when the horse had calmed, "or get out of the way."

It was a man, that much was clear, but the torch blinded Hemery too much for her to make out more than brown hair plastered to his face by the rain. The horses shifted nervously before the stranger.

"I may ask your purpose here, King Thorin," replied the man. "Seldom does royalty venture this way."

"Who are you to speak so freely about the king of Erebor?"
The man came closer. Hemery saw a glimpse of a sword beneath his cloak and gripped the handle of a knife stuffed into her boot.

"How many men do you keep in your dungeons that you do not recognise them?" The man raised the torch higher, allowing them to see his face better.

It was the ranger, Tarren Low.

Suddenly, several men and women came forward from the forest, armed with bows and arrows, surrounding them. Vannur, Rál, and Bror drew their bows, aiming tightly pulled arrows at them and Tarren.

Thorin did not seem terribly alarmed. "I see your men remembered their bows this time. Out hunting again?"

"We've caught enough for one day. Though I wasn't expectin' a dwarf king and his prince to be my quarry."

"Where's Kíli?" Thorin spoke through his teeth this time, growing less patient.

"He's probably receivin' a royal greetin' by the new landlord." Tarren's grim face said that was not a good thing. "We did not have time to warn him before he entered."

"Warn him of what?" Hemery asked.

"A lot has changed since we last spoke, Lady Skinner. The Brages are gone. No one has seen them since the fire. Not that it makes much difference. They were merely replaced by the next wealthiest man in town—Graham, son of Grohm."

Hemery froze. Graham, who had caused her sister so much suffering ten years ago, was now in charge of Blackwater? She should have known he and his family would try to seize power over the community as soon as Brage wavered. She would not be surprised if the great fire had in fact been arson.

She glanced at Thorin. Meeting her eyes, he seemed to realise her worry and mirrored her apprehension. Perhaps they would now fruitlessly pursue an old conflict with a new leader.

"He's a merchant," Hem said to Tarren. "How did he get the people's confidence?"

"He's become much more, m'lady," the ranger replied. "Somehow, he gathered the money to take over Brage's soldiers. Now, he practically owns the ridge."

"But you're not paid by Graham?" she asked, confused. Tarren's men still aimed arrows at them.

"I'll take no wages from a man who taxes people to the bone," he replied sternly. Then he motioned for the others to lower their weapons.

"Don't worry, Your Highness," Tarren said, reaching out to pat the horse's neck. "We'll take you to your nephew."

Thorin made the guards put away their bows as well, continuing on their way to the town with Tarren and his companions as escort.

"Are you familiar with this man—Graham?" Thorin asked Hemery.

The vision of a blood-soaked bed and Hanah's pale face flashed in her mind, and fire ignited in her
gut.

"Aye, I know who he is."
Unexpected Ashes

A wooden fence, twice Hemery's height, blocked the road with a guard at the top, scouting arrivals. There never used to be a fence around the town, Hemery thought.

Tarren stopped in front of the gate.

"Open up!" Tarren called to the man at the top.

"No admissions after night fall," the guard answered mechanically.

"Those orders have expired. Brage's not here to discipline you. Open up already."

"These are Master Graham's orders," the guard stated, unbothered.

Master Graham? Hemery could not help but snort at the idea.

"You can tell Master Graham," Tarren began curtly, "that there's a dwarf king outside the gates who will not be pleased to be kept waitin' in the rain while his nephew is inside. So get off your arse, quickly man, and open the bloody gate."

The guard rose to peer down at them, as if trying to see this king Tarren spoke of. Then he disappeared behind the fence. After a long moment, one half of the gate was roughly pulled open on muddy, uneven ground.

One at a time, they were allowed inside. Tarren made sure everyone got through before the gate was closed, then he approached Thorin.

"This way," he said. "I think I know where your nephew is."

Hemery lowered her hood as they rode through the town. It looked very much the same as she remembered, but it was like a memory from something she had read in a book; she felt like she had never actually lived in this place, only dreamt about it.

Thorin, Hemery, and the guards did not dismount their horses until Tarren stopped outside a house that was bigger than the others. Hardly had Hemery set foot in the mud before the door opened, spreading bright orange light from within, and the shadow of a man fell on the approaching party. She could only distinguish his silhouette in the doorframe.

"Stragglers, I see," the man commented nonchalantly.

Was it Graham? Hemery could not tell. It had been so long since she had seen him.

Tarren came forward. "May I present King Thorin, son of Thror son of Thrain." He swiped his arm in a formal gesture towards Thorin.

"Dwarf royalty at Blackwater Ridge," the man said. "Has another dragon possessed Erebor? I imagine little else could compel you to leave the comfort of your throne, Your Highness."

Granted, Thorin was not at home, but Hemery would have expected a bit more respect from these people. Then she remembered—they were men. The further away from mountains one ventured, the less men regarded dwarves. And in Blackwater, they were viewed as the spawn of demons.

"Where's Kíli?" Thorin asked, foregoing politeness since the man showed none.
Just as the words died on his lips, Kíli appeared in the door, Sveir and Sunna following him out into the street.

"Uncle," Kíli exclaimed, relieved. "At last. I was beginning to worry." He looked at their companions, and finally at Hemery, making sure all were accounted for. Then he noticed Tarren.

"Mister Low, I see you have returned to Blackwater in one piece. How . . . unlikely," he stated ambiguously, clearly wondering the same thing as Hem—was Tarren working for Graham now that the Brages were gone? Should they be worried about the ranger and his comrades?

"Everything alright?" Thorin asked low when Kíli came up to him.

Kíli nodded, but his jaw was set in apprehension or discomfort of some kind.

"Mister Graham has . . . allowed us to stay a few days to make our own inquiries about the fire." Kíli spoke carefully, clearly not happy with the man who was apparently managing things in Brage's absence.

Graham had moved aside when Kíli passed him, letting the light spill on his face. He had dark complexion and was moderately tall for a man. But he was shorter than Hemery remembered.

"And we're not alone," Kíli continued. "A party from the Iron Hills beat us here."

The fire must indeed have been great if it had been seen from that far away. A party was an insignificant presence, hardly a political influence and definitely not a military strength. But even if the iron dwarves were few, Hemery felt relief nonetheless.

"You are more than welcome to join your kin at the inn," Graham said, starting down the road to guide them, eager to have them on their way.

Tarren and his companions also followed them through the streets, but Hemery got the feeling that it was for their benefit rather than Graham's.

"What about the others?" Thorin asked Kíli, referring to their soldiers.

"Unfortunately, there's just no room for military troops in Blackwater," Graham replied. "I'm afraid they had to remain outside the gates."

Thorin all but glared at the man.

It appeared Graham did view the dwarves as a threat and did not want the armed soldiers near if he could help it.

"They have set up camp on the south side," Kíli informed Thorin.

"So we're cut off from them?" Hemery asked.

Graham looked at her then, as if noticing her for the first time.

"The fence on the east side was destroyed in the fire. No one is locked in or out. One simply has to take a detour through the forest if the gates are inconvenient."

"How much was destroyed? We've seen no damage so far," she asked.

Graham looked at her a moment, as if processing her question but not coming up with an answer.
"Apologies, I didn't catch your name," he said, narrowing his eyes like he could not see her well in the dark.

Could he see hints of Hanah in her features? Would he dare say anything if he did?

"Hemery Skinner," she said flatly, waiting for his reaction, but there was nothing.

"Well, Miss Skinner, you can see for yourself. You'll pass the site as you go to the inn from here."

Graham motioned to a path to the right.

He was right. When Hemery moved around the corner, she saw the remains of a house in the scarce light from neighbouring houses. Beams balanced gingerly from stone fireplaces in the heaps of ash and rubble. Some of the piles still gave off wisps of smoke. She could see a large black gap between buildings, behind the burned house, where the fence had once been and now only a wide passage led out into the forest.

The open space made Hemery feel vulnerable despite having lived next to that very forest for twelve years, always fearing the town more than it. Why had they erected that fence at all? What did they fear? Was it to keep something out, or to keep something in?

Thorin and Kíli noticed a handful of shapes in the shadows by the ruins, which they approached and greeted. The Iron Hill dwarves, Hem realised.

They introduced Hemery to the unfamiliar faces. Grání, Bírn, Dagný, and Sigurd—representatives from Dain Ironfoot's council.

"What are you doing out here in the rain?" Kíli asked after the proper greetings and politeness were out of the way.

Dagný pointed to the ashy darkness before them, wordlessly.

Following her line of sight, Hemery made out a small shape among the shades of black. Was that a person sitting in the destruction?

"Who is that?" Thorin asked.


"We've been tryin' t get her to speak to us about what happened, but she refuses to say a word," Sigurd rumbled displeased, clearly not enjoying being kept waiting in the cold evening for a wee lass to deign speak to them.

"I believe I know the reason why," Thorin stated dryly.

Lady Brage raised that girl during an imprisoned childhood. She would not even want to share a privvy with dwarves, much less any information regarding her parents.

"So you found her," Hem said to Tarren.

"No," he replied, neither insulted nor discontented. "Another group had already caught her when we got back. She only managed to avoid them for a few days. Might have been for the best. She wouldn't have survived long on her own."

Hemery carefully made her way into the ash, raising her cloak off the ground to not smear her clothes with the wet, ink-like soot. When she came near the girl, she could see thin shoulders
beneath yellow hair darkened by the rain. She must take after her father more than her mother, Hem thought. She must also be freezing.

"Miss?" Hemery began softly. The girl tensed, but did not move.

Hemery sat on her haunches in front of her.

"Are you alright?"

The girl did not answer. Slowly, she raised her head to meet Hemery's eyes, but it was as if she could not see her. Or as if she was looking at someone else.

"It's over," the girl said. "It's all gone."

Hem remembered Tarren saying something about her being almost twenty, but she looked younger.

"I just . . . I just wanted to breathe. But the fire eats all. It eats it all. You try to feed it, but it's always hungry."

Hemery frowned, a vague suspicion growing in her mind.

She saw Graham over the girl's shoulder, saying something to a woman at the edge of the ruins. His maid, perhaps? Then, she moved towards where Hem and the girl sat.

"Did you do this?" Hemery asked low, not wanting anyone to hear the girl's reply.

The Brage girl's eyes lit up then, as if seeing Hemery for real, and wishing to convey some great realisation.

"The fear never stops, you know." She shook her head assertively and sounded almost like Hanah in her judicious, motherly tone.

"What?" Hemery asked, perplexed by her own association.

"It never stops, cause it's in the ground. It's in the rocks, and in your skin. You can feel it coming."

"What's comin'?" Hem wanted to know, but the woman was upon them now. The maid wrapped a blanket around the girl's shoulders.

Her voice was warm but firm like a nurse's. "Asta, it's cold and dark out. It's time to come inside."

"She tried to feed it, but it's always hungry." Her voice faded.

The girl's eyes dimmed once more as she drew into herself. She complied as the woman gently pulled her to her feet and ushered her away. Hemery was grateful that the girl had someone who looked after her, even if it was Graham.

Sighing, Hemery looked down into the ashy mud. They would have to wait until the morning to get real answers from witnesses to the fire.

Something glinted in the dirt, catching her eye. First, she thought it was reflections in the small puddles, but then she realised it was metal. Picking it up and twisting it in her fingers, the mud came loose, revealing a round gem on a tarnished silver band.

A ring. Probably belonged to the Brages.
She wiped it on the hem of her cloak. Grey in the low light, the stone was polished and untouched by fire. If left here, it would most likely fall into oblivion.

Graham came up to Hemery, and she hid the small object in her closed palm. She had to force herself to not shun his presence and move away from him as quickly as possible. She rose, pretending to watch Asta being led away past the dwarves.

"Curious coincidence, would you not say, that you would appear now when half the town lies in ruins?" Graham asked her.

Hemery did not know where he was going with this, but she knew it could not be good. She decided not to make it easy for him.

"Curious? Not really. Your neighbours are concerned when such . . . incidents occur. You should be grateful to have people comin' to your aid who care." She tried to sound like the dwarves where old friends of his, making the bizarre comparison for her own amusement.

"But that you of all people would join them," Graham added.

Hemery said nothing. He obviously knew who she was. It would be ridiculous to pretend she did not know who he was as well.

"How's Hanah?" he asked casually, as if inquiring about the weather.

She pressed her nails into her palms, still not speaking, still not looking at him.

"I hear she's done well," he continued. "Bearing the bastard of a dwarf prince. She's outdone herself this time."

"At least she's not in your clutches anymore," Hem stated through tense jaws. She was afraid she would hit him if she looked at him.

"Yes, I daresay it's better she stays where she is," he agreed. His tone was light, but she knew he did not speak out of concern for Hanah's well fare. "Must be a weight on her shoulders, though, having to live each day knowing she'll never pay for her crimes."

Hemery stiffened. Of course, he could not possibly know about Maaret, she convinced herself. Maaret was buried ten years ago in an unmarked grave by the Long Lake. Only a handful of people knew of her fate and who she had been.

Had Maaret not tried to kill Hemery, Hanah, and Fíli, one could almost pity Graham for not knowing what happened to his sister. But she had, so Hemery did not.

Graham went on. "She's still wanted for robbery, horse theft, and murder."

"Murder?" Hem hissed in disbelief, turning to stare at him.

"Indeed." He glanced at her indifferently.

She noticed Kíli and Thorin watching them, growing restless where they stood. They were curious, perhaps worrying about Graham and what they spoke of. And rightly so.

"Hemery?" Kíli called, beckoning her.

Graham graciously motioned for her to walk with him toward the dwarves, as if escorting her from the ash heap.
"And who is she supposed to have killed?" she asked in derision as they began moving, refusing to take even the smallest piece of information under consideration when uttered by him.

Keeping in step with her, he kept his voice low so as to not draw the attention of the dwarves. "One of Lady Brage's guards. She bludgeoned him out by the cottage before escaping on his horse. He later died from his wounds."

The ground tilted suddenly beneath Hemery's feet. Her breathing quickened—she could see the clouds of air billowing from her mouth at a rapid pace, and she felt nausea rise in her throat. But she kept moving.

Graham lied. He must.

"That's bollocks," Hemery spat, contracting every muscle in her body to keep from trembling.

Hemery's ears buzzed. She turned away from him again, fearing she would faint or vomit or rage at him, trying to claw and tear out his tongue from his deceitful mouth.

But it was too specific. The guard had been there. Hemery had hit him. Hard. They had escaped on his horse. They had left the guard to his fate. He might well have died from the cold if not from the violence. Hemery had only hit him to save Hanah, but ultimately, they had killed him. Hemery's and Hanah's actions and choices had killed him.

However, she could not let Graham know this. The accusation may have been true, but Graham had no evidence for any of it. It was all conjecture.

"It's bollocks, and you know it," she whispered forcefully just before they reached Thorin and Kíli.

She passed them, vaguely pointing toward the inn with her chin as she did so. She did not look to see if they caught her meaning, hiding her face beneath her hood. She did not trust her voice or her features at the moment. Fortunately, she heard their heavy steps on the wet ground as they followed.

Tarren bid good night outside the inn and wished them luck.

Looking around before they went inside, Hemery noticed one or two windows where people had been peering out at them from a safe distance. She felt like Tarren was the only one who had solid reason to dislike Thorin and the dwarves, but he was somehow the least hostile towards them.

Subconsciously slipping the ring into her pocket, she forced herself to turn her back to the residents of this toxic town.

Without even washing first, Hemery, Kíli, and Thorin had supper in the king's room. Hem managed to down most of her bowl of soup and some bread, but she still felt waves of nausea now and then, fighting a tremble in her hands. In the end, she was just staring into the fire, leaning her head in her hand with an elbow on the table.

"Hem?" Thorin's voice roused her from her torpor.

"Hmm?" she dropped her hand, looking around.

Apparently, Kíli had already left to his own room, probably to go to sleep. She should too.
"The day's ride did not exhaust you so much that you'll fall asleep at my table," Thorin said. "You should retire. Get out of those wet clothes."

She spotted his damp fur coat hanging over a chair by the fire. She almost wanted to smile, but found no humour left in the joke.

Thorin watched her. "What's the matter?"

Hemery shook her head automatically, but had no strength to dispel his worries. "I don't know," she answered vaguely, despite knowing exactly what made her miserable. To her mortification, she could feel tears gather in her eyes. She feared she would break down if he probed the truth from her.

Thorin got up from his seat, came around the table and poured something into her cup. He pushed it toward her.

She took it and brought it to her mouth. She thought it was water, but a dense, earthy scent filled her nose. It was wine. She frowned.

"No," she objected weakly, putting it down. Spirits had not helped last time she was upset, at the tavern with Kíli, but perhaps it was because it was Kíli who had spurred her.

"One sip," Thorin said calmly. "No more."

She obliged, feeling shallow warmth as the drink went down her throat.

"Now, tell me," he insisted, sitting beside her.

Hem rubbed her forehead tiredly. "It's just . . . That fuckin' Graham," she blurted out, feeling wretched tears run down her cheeks. They were impossible to stop or hide now.

"What did he do?" his voice was strangely flat.

She looked at him. His face was dark, and the flickering shadows from the fireplace made him look fiercer than his usual temper painted him.

"Whatever he did, I will undo it," he said. And it actually sounded like he meant it.

Hem whimpered in a half-laugh which quickly turned into a sob. She put her hand in front of her mouth to stifle her pathetic noises.

Thorin astonished her, most often with his moods and rough manners, but sometimes with his courage and will power. If only he could undo it, she would do whatever he asked. She would follow him to the end of the world. But he could not.

She shook her head. "It's not even him. It's me . . . I made a horrible, horrible mistake."

He listened quietly, sensing the gravity in her words.

"When Hanah and I left Blackwater ten years ago, we were set upon by one of the landlord's guards. We almost didn't make it. He was on top of her, holdin' her down, chokin' her, and I—"

She could hardly form the words. "I hit him."

Thorin's face was blank, but she knew he took in every detail.

"I hit him in the head with an iron rod . . . and he didn't get up," she said simply but meaningfully.
“Good,” Thorin said, pursing his mouth in a grimace of distaste.

Hem jerked at his bark, shocked by his vehemence.

“Anyone who assaults defenseless souls is a criminal, no matter who commands him. I take it Mister Graham just now informed you of the fate of this man,” he guessed.

She nodded, befuddled.

“Death is always regrettable—”

Hem winced at his speech.

“—but it was not your intention. You did what your instinct and judgement bound you to do. What else could you do?” he challenged.

She squeezed her eyes shut. "I don't know."

His hand covered hers, and she promptly opened her eyes to meet the steel of his stare. His skin was warm and dry, enfolding her cold digits on the table.

Thorin had not touched her in almost ten years, and never for any other purpose than a farewell handshake. But she did not have time to process its meaning because he was speaking again.

“You were a child. A twelve year old girl removing the threat to her sister's life. I know you. I know your story. You are not to blame for what circumstance and spiteful men thrust in your path.”

“But I killed someone,” she whispered, transfixed by his gaze.

“And that is unfortunate, yes,” he replied in his calm rumble, nodding in sympathetic agreement. "But surviving in a violent world does not make you evil, it makes you strong."

Hemery snorted unladylike. "Doesn't feel like it."

"Not now, but it will."

She held his eyes for a moment. There was patience and assurance there, but also sadness.

"Have you—" she began, uncertain. "Have you killed anyone . . . outside wartime? Men, or dwarves?"

He briefly closed his eyes. "Aye, I have. People who tried to cage me, and people who tried to kill me. And I've learned from it and learned to live with it, like we all must learn to live in conditions we cannot control."

Hem frowned. She recognised that phrase. What was it? Something they had talked about, a long time ago. About Fili's poisoning, and the misfortune of dwarves and Hemery's family.

She scrunched her nose at that, almost smiling. He was right; she had been a child. A naïve child who told him that bad things happening were not products of misfortune but life, and that all things must be adapted to and not dwelled at.

"If I had known then what I know now, perhaps I wouldn't have been so bloody chipper," she claimed.

"Trust me—you have never been chipper,” he said, smirking and tightening his hold on her hand.
She chuckled through the tears, despite herself, wiping her cheeks with her sleeve, not wanting to disturb the hand resting beneath Thorin's.

"When did you come to know me so well?" Hem asked, only half in jest.

"I don't know," he replied, serious. His eyes were on their joined hands. "But I do know you, do I not?"

Something squeezed her heart. Did he know how much stronger she was with him? Did he know how both his encouragement and his criticism made her want to grow? As much as she hated when he spoke harshly and unthinkingly, she appreciated the unfiltered honesty of those moments. She felt like she knew him better for it. And she knew herself better for observing her own reactions to him.

Hemery turned her hand over under his, locking their fingers together.

"Thank you," she whispered.

His gaze returned to her, surprised. "Thank me?"

"For givin' me a chance. I know most people wouldn't even consider allowin' a woman, especially not a girl of men, into the meltin' pot of politics and conflict. And though I've disappointed you in the past, you've never ignored me or given up on me."

And even when he learned she had killed a man, Thorin could still look at her like she was righteous and good.

He watched her with a pensive frown. "You've never disappointed me," he said, almost imperceptibly low. "I do not expect you to be anything other than what you are."

What was she? Was she his friend who could share his fire and his counsel? Or was she simply the girl who took care of the issues related to men? Or both? She was torn in so many directions, and she was too tired to draw any conclusions. Tomorrow would be a long day as well.

"I knew it wouldn't be easy comin' back here," Hem said, sighing. "It's like the very air is suffocatin'."

"You'll breathe easier in the morning."

Yes. He was probably right. She should get some sleep.

Hemery stood then, Thorin mirroring her movement. She did not want to go, or let go, but she had to. Slowly, she released his hand, tracing his strong fingers until they ended, leaving only air on her skin. His hand stayed the same, as if he was still holding hers.

His features were unreadable once more, only watching her like he did when he expected her to speak. But she did not know what he wanted her to say.

"Good night, Sire," she whispered before leaving his room.
Hemery woke up sweating in the early morning, unable to go back to sleep. Her heart beat furiously, but she did not know why. And when she closed her eyes, only blood, ash, and snarls like those of wild animals endured.

At dawn, she rose to get some fresh air. The sky was grey as she stepped out alone. Bror was still resting, and she had no other guard with her. A few other early risers moved along the muddy streets, starting their business for the day. The kitchen workers at the inn had been readying the breakfast as she left, but Hemery had no appetite.

After circling the town, calming some nameless nervousness in her gut, she arrived at the burning site. The rubble was completely dead after last nights rain. No more smoke escaped the ashes.

It had been a great house, she reflected. Large and tall—all wood. But it had been vulnerable. When fire caught on, it could only be a matter of moments before an entire building was engulfed and beyond saving. She had seen it before. It did not stop until there was nothing left to consume.

Hemery felt a chill along her spine.

It is always hungry.

"Miss Skinner," a hoarse female voice called, accompanied by a steady footfall in the wet dirt.

Hem turned to see Vannur approach her from the inn. The dwarf did not wear a helmet or head covering against the cold morning, but her thick hair hardly stirred in the wind. Hemery briefly thought Vannur's blood must run much hotter than hers; Hem had to wear layers of linen and wool under her hooded cloak.

Although Vannur's forehead was smooth and untroubled with assured, marked, aquiline eyebrows, Hemery's first thought was that something was wrong to have forced the king's guard to look for her. Ice spread in her chest, inexplicable and instant.

But Vannur's voice remained low and cool when she came to stand next to Hemery. "You shouldn't wander on your own, Miss." Then she fell silent and still.

True, she should not strain Bror more than necessary by disappearing without a word, but she also did not wish to force him to insomnia just because she had been. It was just a walk around the town. Hem would not be as noticeable as the dwarves when pursuing their investigation, but she guessed any anonymity would soon be ruined anyway.

"Mornin'," Hem said, clearing her throat, working the gravel from her unused voice. "Was that all?"

"Aye, Miss." Vannur remained by her side.

Hemery looked around, as if expecting more dwarves to join them since Vannur seemed to wait for something, but there was no one.

"Have you been sent to summon me?" Hem asked confused.

"No, Miss. The king grew concerned when you would not answer your door. I'm assigned to your watch."
But Vannur was Thorin's personal guard.

"There's no need. Bror will be up soon, and I won't dwell long."

"King's orders, Miss." Vannur was immune to Hem's arguments. "Bror is to regain his strength and return to duty this evening. I'll not leave you until he is present and combat ready."

The ice in Hem's stomach renewed its chill. "You expectin' combat?"

"Always, Miss."

Hemery sighed. Of course, like Dwalin, Erebor's soldiers were in a state of constant vigilance when on duty. And most of the time off duty, as well.

She made no indication of agreeing or accepting Vannur's statement. She knew it would make no difference to the guard.

"If you don't mind me saying, Miss, you look unwell," Vannur said. "Is anything the matter?"

Hemery felt like she had been asleep all winter, but she knew she had barely slept at all, and that was the problem. Her thought had to push through a grey mist, numb and dull. And the chill in her bones would not dissipate.

"Just tired," Hemery replied.

The day passed in a haze. At dinner, Hemery sat with Thorin, Kíli, and the Iron Hill dwarves at a corner table in the tavern. She had washed and changed clothes in her room before the meal. The hot meat and the cold water revived her enough to recount the recent events in her mind while the dwarves spoke between themselves.

She had looked for the Brage girl, Asta, but not found her. Graham's people would not admit her to his house to see her. Kíli was just now saying something about how the fire had started upstairs, according to witnesses—Brage's servants and neighbours. That was how everyone downstairs were able to escape while Lord and Lady Brage had not.

Most seemed to believe Asta had started the fire. And although no one wished to speak the actual words, all the facts pointed in that direction. Asta had wanted to leave, but her parents would not allow it. This gave her motive to destroy the place that kept her prisoner and to punish her captors. It would explain how she was unscathed while the Brages were nowhere to be found.

Granted, no one was in a particular hurry to search for them. Their neighbours were busy overseeing the damage made to their own properties, and Graham who acted as the new master of Blackwater had no interest whatsoever in finding the old landlord. The burn site would probably remain untouched as long as no one claimed the land it soiled.

Hemery had a vague memory of speaking to Kíli and Tarren about some of these issues, but the hours seemed to fuse together, and she could not recall exact conversations. It was like sobering up after a long night of drinking with Kíli at The Dragon's Head. She should pay closer attention to the dwarves' discussion, she thought.

Changing focus from her plate to her dinner companions, Hemery met Thorin's gaze.

How long had he been watching her? Had he tried to address her like last night and she had not responded? She could not tell. Though seemingly engaged in the discussion, his eyes kept coming
"Since we arrived," Dagný spoke, "we've received requests to reintroduce trade and transport negotiations with Blackwater."

"By Mister Graham?" Kíli asked in disbelief. Hemery idly thought he was right to distrust any good will from him.

"No, but several other merchants and manufacturers," Bírn explained further.

"We'll be leaving the ridge soon," Sigurd said. "So we suggested a general hearing in the morning to establish some line of communication and present a rudimentary exchange-of-services deal. Similar to what you did with Esgaroth."

It was a good idea, Hemery agreed silently. When Lake Town had been destroyed thirty years ago, Erebor helped rebuild it, subsequently owning the entire city, basically. Blackwater was also in need of reconstruction. Besides the Brages' house and everything around it, preventive measures had to be introduced to the growing population if another fire were to rage.

There were many people in this town, but no one took care of them. There was no school, no house of healing, no defenses, no public forum, no official landlord—nothing. Erebor and the Iron Hills were in perfect condition and location to help with these issues.

"Do you think they'll agree to that?" Kíli asked.

"If we appeal to their sense as opposed to their fear," Grani said. "Stress the advantages of being allies as opposed to estranged neighbours. The people are scared and tired of being ruled by selfish lords."

"Did you see what they did to the old mines?" Dagný asked.


"Aye, though they weren't mining—they were looking for Brage's sons. Trying to find the remains of boys who died decades ago. And they forced half the town to put their own lives and livelihoods on hold to do it."

"Bloody Mahal," Kíli muttered.

"Like slaves they worked," Dagný clarified, nodding. "Trust me, if we offer a peaceful hand, the people of this town will accept it."

"What about the power shift?" Thorin asked. "Will the new management allow it?"

"Graham's the one with the soldiers in his pocket," Kíli said. "Should we expect problems on that end?"

Hemery thought about the man who had only spoken to her once, but had influenced her life so fundamentally. When he jabbed her about Hanah and her supposedly half-dwarf bastard the day before, he did it for her ears only, though Thorin and Kíli also could have been injured by it. He wanted her to hurt—her and Hanah—but he did not dare push the dwarves.

"Graham is not like Brage," she said. "He may not approve of your kin, but he's not foolish enough to provoke you. Not to your faces. I think—"
She paused, suddenly aware of how much depended on her words. If these honourable dwarves listened to her and heeded her advise, she could be part of great change at Blackwater, or great destruction. She took a deep breath, collecting her thoughts.

"I think that . . . If you manage to sway the people before you leave, secure their good will . . . Graham will follow."

Kíli and Thorin contemplated the idea with tentative nods. The Iron Hill dwarves watched Hemery carefully, as if not convinced her opinion mattered at all. For once, Hemery did not care. They did not know her, but she knew herself. And she had been entrusted to aid the communication between the cities, and she would do it. For Hanah, for Thorin, and for their family.

"Spread the word," Thorin told the others. "We assemble in the morning to establish negotiations. Most importantly, the meeting will be open to all who wish to attend."

"Aye," the others approved, and finished their meal.

Then Thorin leaned toward Hemery slightly, speaking low to avoid the others' attention.

"Vannur reported you'd been distracted today. Are you unwell?"

She sighed. Of course her sleepwalker state had been visible. Perhaps she was getting sick?

He frowned when she would not answer immediately. There was no use in attempting to persuade him she was fine, that much was certain.

"I'll get some rest. I should be fine in the mornin'."

But Hemery could not sleep. As soon as she entered her room, she was overwhelmed by worries for tomorrow and unknown threats, and when she lay down in her nightclothes under the covers, the bed provided no warmth. Trembling and turning, she fell into a feverish state, half-awake, half-dreaming. More ash and blood filled her senses.

Suddenly, she was wide awake. Too awake. She saw everything clearly, heard every creak of the wood, every beat of her heart, but distantly like through a window or at the end of a tunnel. The visions had been dreadful, but she did not recall what happened. She had been looking for Thorin. He was hurt or . . . worse. Her stomach clenched painfully at the thought.

She wanted to see him. Was he really just down the hall? Was he safe in his room? She could not just go to check on him in the night. Or could she? What if she did nothing? What if something happened to him here where everyone hated dwarves? What if he was poisoned like Fíli? Another stab to her stomach.

The pain did not go away.

Hemery paced her room restlessly, taking shallow breaths, quicker and quicker until her fingers and toes pricked. She pressed cool fingers against her scalp. Why could she not shrug the feeling of terror, the fear of something harming him at this very moment?

She had to see him.

Barefoot, Hemery walked silently down the hall to not alert the guards at the entrance of the corridor. The only source of light came from a small window filtering pale moonlight at the end of the hallway. The shadows seemed to move, an oily blackness covering the floor and streaming over her feet like water flowing from the king's threshold. She knocked gently, but when she heard no sound from within, she increased the force. On the third try, she finally noticed movement
behind the door.

Thorin opened a crack to glare at whoever disturbed his peace, but swung the door open completely when he saw Hemery. Quickly he ushered her inside, glancing around as if to detect the reason for her appearance.

Establishing the corridor as empty, he closed the door and turned to face her. He wore only a thin shirt and trousers. This was the first time she had seen him in anything less than three layers of fur, wool, and linen. The relief that flooded her when she saw him in his entirety, standing there, alive and breathing, was overwhelming. She threw her arms around his shoulders, embracing him tightly. Though she saw him only hours ago, it felt like months.

Hemery's senses peaked. She had his strong back beneath her hands, his soft, long hair between her fingers, his shoulder against her nose inhaling his scent of leather, soap, and sleep. Nothing seemed to have roused him except her insistent knocking. A few heartbeats passed before she felt cautious, hot palms brushing her shoulder blades through her shift.

That snapped her out of her reverie. She berated herself for her selfishness. She had come to make sure he was safe, but all she was concerned with was to calm herself with his presence.

Pulling back, she looked into his face. Nothing marred his skin, no blood or abrasions. Only a surprised sort of wonder graced his features, which was to be expected since she woke him in the middle of the night. She ran her fingers over his brow, his cheeks, tracing his bearded jaw and continued down his neck, searching for injuries.

Thorin's own hand rose to graze her cheek.

"Hem . . ." Her name was a hoarse whisper in the gloom.

She hardly noticed how whatever he was going to say trailed off, letting her eyes and hands travel further down his chest, over his shirt, up his back, down his arms. If he was bleeding or broken in any way, she should be able to see it. But if the harm was within—Hemery shuddered at the memory of poison—her examination would be fruitless, finding nothing until it was too late. What if she was already too late?

Frustrated and wrecked with exhaustion, fear, and pain, she leaned her forehead on his shoulder. She grasped his hand in hers, clutching it hard, and emitted a painful wheezing sound. A sigh without strength for tears.

"Hemery?"

A careful hand was placed on her head, as if to comfort her. She broke away at the thought. She had no time for comfort; she needed to find the threat. There had to be a threat, something she missed. Otherwise, why did she feel this fear?

Looking around the room, she followed the wall with her hand to make sure they were solid and not an illusion. She tore at the bed linens, ripped off blankets and furs. Strained to look beneath the bed and behind furniture. Opened cupboards and turned over the table.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

When she sat down on the floor, finding a knife to cut open the stuffing of one of the chairs, Thorin stopped her. Holding her wrists as if shackled between them, he forced her to look at him.

"What is the matter? Say something."
Hemery stared at him a moment. His eyebrows knotted, he regarded her apprehensively, as if he was worried she was hurt and not the other way around.

She looked at his hands holding hers and froze. What was she thinking, coming to the king's room at night, unbidden, throwing herself in his arms, and ruining his bedding as well as his sleep? Suddenly, she flushed. She should really return to her room.

But she could not. There was something wrong. Something clawing at her sleep deprived mind. Dizziness tilted her world briefly.

"I don't know," she answered miserably, letting go of the knife. It clattered against the floor. "I just have this ache, this fear I can't shed. Somethin's comin' . . . or is already here—I don't know. There's a mist in my head, blandin' me. We're in danger, you're in danger—" Hemery stopped her rambling when she realized how she must sound. " . . . Sire," she finished meekly.

Thorin's blue gaze pierced her, sharp and discerning.

"You sound like the Brage woman," he muttered.

Annoyance flared suddenly. She glared at him. Why could he not feel it? He had to believe her.

"I'm not mad." Twisting her hands free and standing up straight, she challenged him with a determined frown of her own.

"We must leave this place as soon as possible," she said, sober and practical now.

Thorin rose, turned the chair right side up, and sat down heavily on it.

"We cannot leave until we've established what has happened here. And the new landlord will be another pain in my arse if we don't conclude our dealings with him before going home."

"That one—landlord?" Hem scoffed, beginning to pace restlessly. "Don't make me laugh."

"Doesn't matter what he calls himself. He'll be a problem if we do not crush this little empire of his in its infancy."

"Then call for reinforcements. We are too few. You're the king and practically defenseless out here. The fences are demolished by the fire, and even if they were intact, we'd be locked in with people who despise dwarves and your supposed claim to this land."

"I have claimed nothing yet."

"To them—to Graham—you have just by comin' here."

"And summoning a legion would help matters how?"

Hemery wrung her hands. "Not an army, but . . . " She tried to find a compromise that he might accept. "Five hundred?"

Thorin sighed and rubbed his forehead. But he did not refuse immediately.

"Four hundred then?" Hemery pleaded, kneeling in front of him between his feet, her hands on the armrests on either side. "We're all alone out here."

He regarded her a long moment.
"I'll summon three, but I fear it will cost me a dear price." His tone was grave, but he gave his assent, nonetheless.

Hemery breathed out, closing her eyes. "Thank you, Sire."

She rose to leave. However, the simmering in her gut did not dissipate. She should go to her room now, but she knew she would only toss and turn until morning, feeling the walls close in on her. She hesitated at the door.

Thorin seemed to recognise her unease.

"Is there anything else I can do for you?" he asked patiently and considerate.

He had already done her a great service. How could she explain that it was not enough?

"What can be done to calm your mind?"

She had never heard him speak with such a soft voice before. She wished she could stay in his room, watching over him and having him watch over her. But that was impossible. Short of going home, there was nothing to be done.

Hemery would never be safe in Blackwater again. Not like she had been as a small child in the presence of her father and sister. And it was not herself she feared for. Who would protect Thorin? Who could protect Thorin?

Hem met his eyes carefully, feeling tears gather in her eyes.

"I wish Hanah and Dwalin were here."

For once, she did not hide her fears and insecurities from him when he searched her face. When he found what he was looking for in her countenance, he nodded in understanding.

"May I ask you spend the night in Vannur's room?" he asked carefully like treading on ice. "I would rather not leave you alone tonight."

Vannur's room was just across the hall. Since she would accompany Hemery during the day, she slept while Bror was on night duty.

Hemery smiled briefly in relief. She really did not want to return to her own room.

"I'd like that," she admitted.

With Vannur's calm, regular breaths persuading her heart to follow the steady rhythm, Hemery could finally allow herself a light slumber.

Hemery woke with a start when Vannur closed the door as she left the room. For a moment, Hem could not remember where she was. Just like last evening, she felt like coming up for air from under water. She had a vague recollection of Thorin asking her to stay with Vannur, but she was not certain. Tired and shaky, she rose to prepare for the day though the pale rays of sun had just touched the treetops outside.

She dressed in a grey tunic over leather trousers, a thin wool shirt on top, covered by her long riding coat. She slid one knife into each of her boots. With a knitted shawl wrapped around her
shoulders and her neck several turns to ward off the chill of dawn, she set out on a walk about the town border, outside the high wooden fence. Vannur followed her silently, not objecting like Hem knew Bror would have, but almost curious.

The land sloped. Dry, sandy earth holding a mix of pine, firs, and juniper bushes. The hills made sight a problem. Hemery could only see ten to twenty yards between the trees in each direction.

They passed the dwarves' camp. Some were performing maintenance on tools and weapons. Some they came upon among the trees, patrolling the area like it was the borders of Erebor. It felt familiar and safe to encounter the various dwarven faces in this unstable place.

Fear had driven Hemery out of the town, and she thought she would find it here in the quiet forest as well. But to her surprise, she felt more calm and collected out here than she did at the lodge. She could see how strange her anxiety of the past few days had been, and she tried to view any potential risks from outside herself, from outside the town. Logically, there was a greater risk of danger from Graham or the inhabitants of Blackwater towards the dwarves than any unknown outside force, but she completed the surveillance all the same.

In some places, the fence tilted inwards slightly. The first time, she hardly noticed it, figuring the fence was poorly structured or had moved with weather or soft ground. But at closer inspection, she saw impressions on the planks as if something or someone had pushed at it. The same markings were on the other indentations as well. The undergrowth seemed disturbed, but that could be from any animal, carnivore or herbivore, in the area. In any case, the fence had been tested systematically for weaknesses.

"Something has been tryin' to get in," Vannur stated.

Hem frowned worriedly looking back, nodding. "Aye."

The Brages might have acted appropriately when taking such painstaking precautions, Hemery mused. Perhaps a moat would have been in order.

She looked around at the forest, brown and dark green in the early light. Crows squawked in the distance. The wind tugged at the trees, sounding like rushing water. Though the evidence was right there, she could sense no danger in the calm morning. But in contrast to yesterday, she knew there could be danger even if she did not feel it.

On the last stretch before coming full circle around the town, they found some berries and nuts to eat on the way. In the silence, her thoughts would constantly return to the images of the night—carnage, smoke, and death. It snuck up on her unexpectedly, clinging to her consciousness. She had to physically shake her head and wave her hands in front of her, making a humming sort of noise to erase the imagery and sounds in her mind. As usual of late, she almost forgot that Vannur was with her. She only glanced at Hem, a smirk hiding in her cheek.

"Spiderweb," Hem explained simply, ignoring the amused look.

The entire night felt like a fever dream, a nightmare she could not make sense of. She saw no bodies, nor did she find any of her dear ones she seemed to be looking for in the dream, but she was haunted by a sense of hopelessness, fear, and anger. The mist coated all memories, mixing dream and reality.

At the return to the lodge, the sun had ascended to the point of calling the day into action. People were already gathering in the assembly hall to begin the dialogue between dwarves and men. Following the stream of people, she took a seat at the far end of the dwarves' table. She saw
Graham's lot, all haughty demeanour and ready to show all kinds of new insolence in tribute to the new day. Many of the town's people attended the meeting as well, standing or sitting around wherever there was room.

As the room settled, she cast a glance about her own table, catching Thorin's eye where he sat in the middle. He raised an eyebrow in question, to which she had no response. She maintained a neutral expression, searching her surroundings for whatever he might be referring to with his silent query.

Something was missing. Hem leaned back towards the closest dwarf guard who was standing in line, very official looking, behind the table.

"Where's Prince Kíli?" she whispered.

"Don't know, Miss," came his rough but honest reply.

Before she could ask anything else, the hall was called to order, and the meeting begun.

Over the course of the day, very little was agreed upon—nothing, to be specific. Hemery found herself sliding further down in her seat and almost nodding off a few times. The dwarves conveyed their concern about the future of the community because of the previously unstable government, but got very little response.

Dain's representatives did rather well, Hem thought. They regaled clearly the dire financial circumstances and defenseless state the town was in. They also attempted—quite civilly by dwarven standards—to offer their services to rebuild the town, under Khazad banner, of course.

Graham's camp, on the other hand, acted like adolescents who imagined themselves capable of handling the well fare of a thousand people with no experience whatsoever, refusing any help from the dwarves. They were naturally "grateful" for Erebor's and the Iron Hills' concerns, but thoroughly dismissed any and all ideas of submission.

When the sun was so low on the horizon that candles had to be lit in the hall, Hemery lost her patience. She was hungry and tired of these people thinking themselves important, dwarves as well as men.

She stood so abruptly that her chair swayed on two legs an instant before bouncing back against the stone floor. The banging drew everyone's attention.

"Your Highness," she proclaimed cordially, as proper when addressing an official hearing. When she turned to Graham to address him, she merely inclined her head. "Mister Graham."

Her voice barely masked her scorn.

"Many of you don't want to release your claim on the ridge, and King Thorin doesn't wish to take it from you—"

"Miss Skinner—" Gráni interjected, trying to stop her for fear of what she might claim next. He turned to his opposition. "She does not speak for the dwarves."

"The way I see it," Hemery stated, undeterred. "You have the right to dwell here because you were born here, and you have made it your home."

A few scattered "aye" and other muttered agreements were heard through the hall.
"However," she continued, "while Mister Graham may be a successful merchant, he cannot guarantee the people of Blackwater a safe and fair society. The knowledge and experience doesn't exist in this town. There's not even a school or healin' institution. There are too many people, and you can't tax them just for security in the form of mercenaries. Why should they pay tax to someone who will pay soldiers in order to keep taxin' people? It's folly."

A murmur erupted in the audience. The dwarves spoke between themselves. Thorin sat unmoved, but she knew him better than to miss the smug smirk that pulled at his mouth.

"As for King Thorin," she went on. "His Majesty has his mountain. None of his kin wants to live here. His Majesty doesn't want the land, and he doesn't need it. But there is still gold in the ridge, probably worth mining for another hundred years. I suggest a fee be paid to Erebor for the minin' of Blackwater Ridge in return for Erebor's aid in rebuilding the minin' system and education in the healin' arts and general literacy to benefit all the citizens of Blackwater."

A loud chatter ensued, some booing in outrage and some clapping. Graham stood and held up his hand to silence the crowd enough for him to be heard.

"That is quite a speech for someone who has not lived here for ten years. You do not know this land. You do not know us."

Hemery knew what he was doing. He attempted to turn the citizens against her, drawing on their sense of belonging—them against the outsiders.

"Who says we need your help?" he continued confidently. "We managed during the Brage's reign, and we'll manage now without them. We don't need the dwarves' help."

"If you don't form an agreement now, it will be disastrous later when your minin' encroaches on Erebor's territory. The question is—do you want to have this discussion on your doorstep, or theirs?"

The dwarves would be less friendly the closer to home the threat of Blackwater appeared.

"We both know where that ore will lead you," she warned.

Graham's face darkened as he leaned forward over the table.

"Our land—our gold," he maintained.

"You mean your gold!" one brave voice called from the crowd, starting a new wave of loud agreements and protests.

Thorin rose. Not aggressively, but determined and with such command that all hushed when he spoke.

"Just because Brage's grandfather put a rag on a stick and stuck it in the ground did not make it his land. Neither does his demise grant you authority in this assembly. It takes more than mercenaries to form an independent state, and Erebor does not recognise your horseshit council." He pointed to the handful of men at Graham's table.

Excited voices, clapping, and whistling, erupted in the hall.

If the king did not acknowledge Graham's ability to speak for the town, there would be no agreement. But it also meant that the citizens now knew the neighbouring kingdoms had no respect for Graham as a leader.
"The people of Blackwater have five days to assemble a council of at least eleven members. Whether you choose to include this buffoon in it is up to you. We will resume our talks at that time."

With those words, he left the hall in an uproar, his councilmembers following suit.

"That was a remarkable waste of a day," Hemery said as she caught up with Thorin on his walk back to their lodgings.

"On the contrary."

She shadowed her narrowed eyes with one hand as she regarded him, the setting sun blinding her before crawling below the treeline.

"I believe we have shortened our visit here significantly," he went on. "In less than six days, we will have an agreement with a newly formed council of this town. I hope you brought some reading. You will have an idle week before we go home."

It was then that Hemery realised he welcomed the abrupt turn of events in their negotiations as it allowed him to push it into a more favourable direction.

She nodded, relaxed. "Very good, Sire."

"Are you feeling better?" he asked, low and serious, as if careful to not let anyone overhear.

She frowned at him. 'I'm fine. Why do you ask?'

Thorin put a hand on her elbow. The touch was so light it was almost imperceptible, but she registered it clearly.

"Hemery . . . last night, I—"

He paused, gathering his words. He seemed worried now, a sharp turn from the satisfaction she had just witnessed. Was something wrong? The first thought in her head was that she would ride to Erebor and back in the blackest night if he asked; whatever he needed, she would produce it for him.

But she could say none of that, so she just regarded him, wide eyes, waiting tensely.

In the same instant, the sun disappeared below the horizon, leaving the streets in blue shadow, and a distant howl sounded through the air. Hem and Thorin looked north toward the sound.

That was no ordinary wolf.

A bell tolled from the temple next to the remains of the big house. Shouts were heard from the gates.

The dwarf party moved quickly to intercept any informant coming up the street, but they met only villagers seeking shelter in their homes. Whatever the bell tolled for, people knew it was not good. At the town square, a larger group of people gathered in anticipation of the news.

Soon, a man ran from the northern gate toward the mass.

"Orcs! Orcs are at the gate."

Startled and terrified exclamations erupted in the square. Thorin made his way to the informant.
"How many?" he demanded.

"Five hundred strong, at least. Hard to tell."

"How close?"

"They'll be here within the hour."

Someone from the crowd spoke out. "But we're safe behind these walls, right? That's what they're built for."

"Nothing to keep out wargs of Gundabad," replied Gráni. "They'll rip through those twigs like paper."

"Why have they come?" Hem asked. "Blackwater never had problems with orcs before."

"Attracted by the smoke, I gather," Thorin guessed. "Like vultures drawn by the promise of death and carnage."

"Like yourself then?" Graham appeared in the crowd, followed by his soldiers.

"Spend less time with pointless accusations and more time rallying your men," Thorin advised venomously.

The soldier next to Graham spoke. "We have no hope of beating back five hundred of those foul creatures. Not if they have wargs among them."

"I paid you generously for these circumstances." Graham did not wish to believe he had spent his hard earned gold for nothing.

"No use if we all die," the mercenary replied. "I will not risk my men on a hopeless venture to be slaughtered and devoured by orcs."

"Nasty way to go," Gráni muttered under his breath. Hemery stared at him. Could he not just shut up if he had nothing to contribute?

"But you live here, don't you?" Hem asked. "Do it for your families if nothin' else."

The man did not reply, only turned and walked away, Graham following. There was no telling what they would choose to do.

"Men like that have no families," Thorin said. "We're lucky if any of them stand with us."

"What now?" Hemery asked.

"Hold them off until mornin'," Dagný said. "When that is no longer possible—well . . ." she trailed off.

Watching Thorin's determined features and his hand grasping the hilt of his sword, Hem was glad she had him at her side in the face of such peril. He met her eye with a darker expression than she had ever witnessed, his lips curling fiercely as in derision of weak men and soulless orcs, and in utter defiance of death itself.

"I'm nothing if not reasonable. If it's carnage the orcs seek—we will oblige them."
The next hour was a flurry of movements. All dwarves were summoned to enter the town to prepare some kind of defense against the approaching orc hoard. Plenty of grown men, those who were able to hold a weapon, joined them and quickly accepted Thorin's authority in the situation. Dwarves were known for their extensive military training and discipline, and Hemery recognised a trace of relief in the men's eyes to have such a confident leader to turn to in the face of this unprecedented threat.

However, she knew many more people dwelled in the area. It seemed they chose to not participate. How they would protect themselves and their families, by hiding or fleeing, she would rather not guess.

Hemery was surprised at how easily the dwarves took their stand. Blackwater was not their responsibility, but none contemplated the alternative of not fighting. It did not seem to even enter their minds to just leave the town to its fate. They knew they had to stay because it was the only reasonable way, the only honourable way, to be. It was not their custom to turn their back on a conflict—especially not on ground that connected veins of stone and precious metal to Erebor.

A few women also joined them, but only those who seemed to have experience of combat or were skilled with a bow and could stay back from brawn and blades.

When Hemery exited the lodge where she had retrieved more knives to fasten around her belt, Thorin's voice reached her.

"You are not fighting."

She whirled to face him, surprised.

"I'm perfectly capable—"

"Irrelevant," he interrupted her. "I don't want you to."

And Hemery did not want to fight. She wanted to be at home in her bed in Erebor, but she guessed neither would have their wish granted. She nearly scoffed. It did not matter what he wanted or thought appropriate.

"You need all the help you can get," she spoke lower, not allowing anyone to hear her less than positive argument.

"You've never fought orcs, and if I can help it, you never shall."

"Dwalin has trained me since I was twelve—"

"And you do not believe he would express exactly the same opinion as I on this?" He raised an eyebrow in challenge.

She gritted her teeth. Dwalin would probably agree with Thorin. A rare occasion indeed—one which Hem would see the humour in had the circumstances differed.

"Aid in gathering the others at the temple. It has sturdy walls, a decent gate. It should keep the children and old folks safe."
Safe? For how long? Thorin could not guarantee anything, and he knew it.

"I'm to do nothin' while you're out here riskin' you're neck?" Hem glared at him.

He stared back, his patience on a knife's edge, but he managed to ignore her provocation.

"Make sure the others are safe," he maintained, calm but determined. "If you must join us, do it after, and stay at the back. Keep close to the others—you will protect each other. Don't stray from your line."

He concluded his speech and left her in the street to return to the northern gate. Hemery kicked the gravel hard with one foot and clenched her fists. Damn dwarf.

Then she froze, remembering something.

"Oy! Where's Kíli?" Hem called after him, but he had already disappeared in the swarm of people.

Frustrated and without purpose, she did as Thorin suggested. She helped gather the people who were still huddled in their houses, urging them to go to the temple where they would be safe. Safer.

When she had checked that the houses furthest from the temple were empty, she went back to the northern gate, but there was no one there.

Suddenly, hollering and screeches filled the air, echoing between the buildings in the ghostly vacant street. She spun around, trying to find the origin.

Hemery cursed under her breath. Of course, the attack would not come from the northern gate. The orcs did not have to break down the fence when there was a gaping hole at the eastern end where the fire had devoured it.

Hemery ran towards the sound when something heavy dropped from the air, landing in front of her. She skidded to a halt in the mud.

The hunched creature rose, long limbs sluggish, hands hanging low near the ground, clutching a weapon of black metal.

An orc, she settled despite the dark. It must have climbed the fence.

Slowly, the round head tilted up, nose sniffing, focus darting. He saw her. Something sparked in his eyes. A sharp curiosity akin to hate, cold and piercing, cut her with those eyes.

He raised his blade and lunged at her with a squawk like a giant, hoarse magpie.

Scarcely had he moved before the knife from her left holster left her fingers, soaring straight at his chest. It clanged and bounced off his armour.

He swiped at her, she ducked under his arm and turning around, facing his back, and buried her second knife in his exposed neck.

The blade cut through flesh easily. She felt the brief resistance as it snapped tough tendons, and then the stop when it finally met bone. Black blood gushed between her fingers as she held on, following the creature in its fall to the ground. When there was no will left in him, she pulled out the knife and staggered back.

Was it a he? She did not know. She could hardly look at him, having to force down bile at seeing the blood mix with muddy water.
She turned, eyes searching the streets, the fence, and the rooftops. Was there more?

It was too dark. She could not tell. She could not stay here; she had to join the other fighters. She collected her knives and moved on.

She stopped abruptly and ducked into an alley at the sight of a moving figure up ahead. Peering around the corner, Hem saw the slight, fair-haired person, definitely mankind, moving towards the fight.

She tried to focus better in the dark. Asta?

Hemery ran after her to catch up. It was clear she was returning to the burn site. What was it with this girl? She must have known it was dangerous.

"Asta," Hem said, touching her shoulder, willing her to stop.

The girl ignored her, moving closer to the cacophony of orcs and men screaming and metal meeting metal. Though one or two buildings separated her view of the battle, Hem knew it was only a matter of time before they were in drawn into the fray like in the surge of the undercurrent of an unstoppable river.

"Come away. You can't be here."

"I need to be with my mother and father."

"No, you really don't. I know you're sad about what happened, but you can't help them now." Hemery tried to gently lead her away towards the temple.

"No!" Asta jerked, tearing out of Hem's grip, striking her across the face with the back of her hand. The girl must have worn a ring or something because a sharp sting smarted on Hemery's cheek. She froze for one heartbeat, and then blood boiled up within her.

If Asta was responsible for the fire, she was partly to blame for the orc attack, and Hemery would not let her perish this night like a martyr suffering under her parents' whip even after their death. Hem gritted her teeth.

"Move," she barked at Asta, her patience wearing thin. She grabbed the girl's arm roughly, pulling her along. Asta complied, probably due to surprise and general subservience which had probably been beaten into her from a young age.

They did not get far. Before they reached the temple, two orcs blocked their way. The girls stopped. Hemery looked around, two more approached from behind. The line of defense must have been crumbling, even though only a few had broken through at the moment. More would soon follow.

The buildings around them had no doors on their side, but across the yard was a stable. All horses had been gathered before the fight; those doors might have been left unbolted. Could they make a run for it?

Hemery threw one blade at the closest orc, settling it deep in his throat. This unforeseen attack made one other step back, hissing and screeching discontentedly, but it was only a temporary hesitation. One might scare hungry wolves with a burning torch, but it would never stop their advance completely.

Hemery kept Asta close to her back, shielding her with her arm as much was possible.
"This one pricks," one growled in a stilted accent, pulling out her knife from the neck of his comrade. "Will you pin us with your thorns?" he taunted, as if excited by the little woman who was not as harmless as they initially thought.

"I'll rip those thorns from her body, and the white fingers and the hair and the eyes," another said menacingly.

Hemery gripped another blade, calculating whom to strike first. She feared she would not have time to take all three down.

"Their milk will spill on my tongue. Sweet, soft, tender——" The orc's revolting hiss and his movement towards them was interrupted by a sword violently piercing his neck from behind, converting the words to bubbling, gurgling, unearthly noise. His neighbour followed him, swiftly cut down by the same sword. It glinted in the dark like a vengeful spirit in the night.

Thorin. Hemery was so relieved to see him. She felt a strong urge to embrace him, though she could not. They had to leave, quickly.

She turned to usher Asta away from the fight, but was stopped as if by an invisible wall, a burning pain tearing through her shoulder. Shocked, Hem looked down.

A sword protruded from Asta's chest and had entered Hemery's shoulder, as if it had been living within the girl and now decided to give birth to itself, breaking through its cage of bone and flesh. But when Hemery lifted her gaze, she saw her own reflection in the black eyes of an orc right at Asta's back.

The pain dragged a broken cry from Hem as he withdrew the sword, mauling her flesh further. Asta slumped in Hem's arms, the light quickly fading in her eyes.

Helpless, Hem held on, feeling Asta's hot blood seep through her clothes. It soaked them, its heat leaving a fine mist in the cold night air. Unbidden tears filled Hemery's eyes, blurring her final vision of Asta who would never again been seen alive by anyone but her. Faintly, she was aware of Thorin killing the orc before he could finish Hemery as well.

"Keep moving," he grunted, the stress palpable in his voice as he gripped her collar, prompting her to stand.

Still holding on to Asta's lifeless body, Hem looked up at Thorin. His eyes were wild, blood spatter on his face, but it did not frighten her as much as the fourth orc at his back. Thorin was just about to turn when one leg gave beneath him, cut from behind by the orc's blade.

"Thorin!" Hem cried, letting go of Asta.

The orc sliced the other leg as Hemery stood, rising above the now kneeling dwarf, and plunged a dagger into the eye of the orc. She left her blade in his skull as he fell twitching to the ground.

"Thorin," she called, carefully lifting his face to hers. But her trembling hands were covered in black blood, so she did not want to touch his skin.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, fearful that he was fatally wounded. He had been protecting her. He should not have had to be here, fighting three orcs alone. She should have done something. Why did she not have more weapons? Why had she not reacted quicker? Why—?

Thorin growled in pain. Hemery cursed herself. She did not have time to dwell on her own shortcomings right now.
"Let's get out of the street," she said, pulling at his arm. She knew more orcs could appear at any moment. Glancing at the stables, she decided to take shelter there. If only she could move him.

Thorin fell forward on his knuckles when he tried to stand as usual. Leaning heavily on Hemery, he managed to rise and take a few steps towards the stable door. He collapsed on the threshold, pushing the door open with his weight.

"We have to move," she wheezed, frustration and terrified anger swelling in her throat. "I came here to stop you from fightin'. I'll not die for you."

"I would never ask you to," he said.

Hemery would die for him, though, whether he asked her or not. Perhaps she would be forced to prove the extent of her loyalty tonight. The thought gave no comfort.

"Come on—get up," she commanded, pulling at his cloak. Her voice was thin and strained.

Thorin tried, but fell to his knees with an involuntary, guttural sound. Hemery tore at his shoulders, supporting him with her good arm, but she could not help carry him more than two stumbling steps into a corner where he slumped down against the wall.

Hemery quickly closed the door, and then crashed beside him, looking over his legs. She had no idea how bad his injuries were, but he had not fainted from blood loss . . . yet. She tore up her shawl into small strips, binding his legs to stop the blood flow. There was nothing else to do.

Carefully peeking through the window, she saw the distinct movements of orcs in the shadows. Overcome by fatigue and hopelessness, Hem lowered herself onto her knees next to Thorin.

Thorin sighed, resigning himself to an uncertain, but surely mortal, fate.

"If you go out the back, you might make it to the temple." He put his hand on her shoulder, pushing her away.

She merely sat back. A lump formed in her throat.

"They have us surrounded. I can't get in. It's only a matter of time before they start breakin' down doors, searchin' every house."

She looked around for a solution, a way out, a better hiding place, or weapons. But there was nothing.

Thorin took her hand suddenly.

"Hide yourself on the loft."

"Why?" she asked. Hem heard her voice break, despair giving it a high pitch. "To save a few moments? To prolong the inevitable? No."

She shook her head, determined.

"Bloody stubborn woman, will you just do as I say?" he growled impatiently. "I will not lay here useless while they come in and violate you before my eyes."

"And I won't hide myself to stay alive long enough to hear them come for you first."

"You will save yourself," he said. "I'm not debating this with you."
"Well, you can't do much about it, so—no, we're not debatin' this."

Thorin gripped her hand almost painfully, groaning. In pain, frustration, or both, Hem did not know.

She glanced at the window. Shadows in firelight flashed by, one by one or groups, all moving in the same direction. If anyone came in, they were done. Thorin could not rise. Hemery had one dagger left, but her shoulder was hurt. They would not be able to defend themselves for very long.

Hemery had heard stories in Tirith about the orcs from Mordor, how they sometimes would eat their victims, tear their limbs and drink their blood. Asta's broken body flashed in her mind—how her eyes dimmed to remain forever unseeing. Silent, hot tears ran down Hem's cold cheeks. What could she do?

"Thorin..." she whispered.

He grunted in reply, blinking up at the ceiling, clearly refraining from squeezing his eyes closed in flares of pain.

"When they come..."

He shook his head. "Not another word."

She ignored him. "When they come, I want you to—"

"No," he growled. "Do not speak it."

"I want you to do it." Hemery placed her dagger on his chest as if it was an offering.

Thorin's other hand clutched hers over the dagger, stopping her from letting go of the blade.

"I said no. Never."

"I don't want to die at the hands of an orc, not... like that." Her voice wavered. She tried to blink away her tears.

"You will not die," he insisted. They both knew he could not promise that. But he could promise her to make it as quick and painless as possible when the time came.

"Just one cut—" she said, putting her fingers on the big vein in her throat.

Thorin put his hand on the side of her face, clutching her hair in his fist, as if holding on harder would make her stay alive. He forced her to come closer, her forehead touching his.

"It'll only take a few heartbeats, and then it's over—" she breathed.

"No," he maintained. "I can't. I won't."

She closed her eyes, unwilling to see the pain in his features. No, she could not ask it of him. When it was time, she would take control of her own fate.

"Then I'll do it myself." She tried to pull back, but he held her fast.

"Would you do the same for me if I asked you?" Thorin asked harshly, tightening the fist in her hair until it almost hurt.
An image of Thorin with a knife in his chest, Hemery's hand on the blade slashing his throat, his eyes lifeless and hollow in her mind. She shuddered, and her head fell on his shoulder. Her grip on the dagger loosened.

He was right. That was not the way.

"Sorry," she whispered. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

The hand in her hair let go to stroke her head, the other on her back, warm through her layers of leather and wool.

He hushed her gently.

Hemery's arms snaked around his chest, holding on to him as much as she could. It felt better than she ever could have imagined, just having her arms around him, feeling his scent. She was ashamed of how good it felt to touch him after so much time of invisible restraints forbidding it. And she should not take any pleasure out of this moment which may be one of their last, but she did.

Thorin seemed to relax, leaning more on her and the wall. With his legs immobile, there were no more challenges to rise toward, no more mountains to climb. He sighed, holding on to her.

"It was dusk." His voice was low and distant, as if his thoughts were elsewhere.

"Yes," she said, wishing she could go back in time to before the orcs came. "They come at night. That's what they do."

She was tired. And it was useless thinking about what she should have done differently.

"When you returned," he explained. "You had the sunset at your back when you greeted your sister, your face in shadow. But when you turned—I knew the sun had barely risen."

He sounded delirious. Was it the blood loss? She pulled back to look at him.

"What are you talkin' about? How do you know? You weren't there."

"I was there. I just . . . did not go down to meet you. I could not."

Hemery remembered that day. He had not wanted to greet her with the rest of his family. For a long time, she thought he had been angry with her. But the look he gave her now confused her.

Thorin's eyebrows were tightly knitted in focus, pain, or a question? Hem could not tell.

"You were my dawn, Hem. It was always so. A sliver of light after a century of darkness. My beloved friend."

He raised her hand to his mouth, pressing her icy fingers to his lips. Though the gesture was affectionate, it did nothing to calm her. It sounded too much like goodbye in the face of death, as if he greeted it like a friend—not her.

"You're makin' no sense, as usual," she said, trying to smile but sure it was only a tight grimace.

"It's the only sense I have made in many years. Any sensible words heard at my court has been uttered by you—a child of men, the most unlikely of sources."

Hemery chuckled without joy. She was harshly reminded by the drama around his court, though
she was much distracted by the way he kept brushing his lips over the pads of her fingers.

"I shouldn't have let myself be wrapped up in the politics of Erebor. I was foolish to let them affect me."

"There's always some truth to idle talk."

She frowned. "Surely, the king of Erebor doesn't listen to gossip?"

Thorin pulled on her hand, so she leaned over his chest, his other hand going to her cheek.

"If death awaits us this night, I see no harm in telling you . . . I have seen magicians and witchcraft, and you are no bewitching fairy—whatever the fear and narrow minds of people say—but I am under your spell. This is the truth."

Hemery was on the verge of refuting his words, but found that she did not want to. She knew the wounds affected his senses—blood loss, pain, and poison from an orc blade will do that. His eyes were glassy, but his hands strong. He was not himself at this moment, but he was also right.

Tonight was all there was. Nothing followed it, nothing related to it. This moment was separate from time and existence. Separate from Erebor and the roles they played there. If they were to be no more, nothing she did now would matter.

Hemery leaned in and carefully brushed his lips with hers. Thorin responded, urging her closer, his mouth bruising hers. Her hands came up to his cheeks, feeling the rough beard in her palms. His arms crushed her chest to his until she had no breath. He tasted of salt and iron, sweat and blood. Even as they met over and over in searing kisses, Hem mourned that they were to be tarnished by battle and death—though they would most likely not live long enough for it to become a memory.

He drew back abruptly, groaning in pain and gritting his teeth. Breathing deeply through his nose, he managed to overcome the wave of agony. He closed his eyes and leaned back, clutching her hand to his chest.

"What can I do?" Hemery asked, fully aware there was nothing to alleviate his pain. She reached out tentatively with her free hand and pushed hair away from his forehead.

"Sing to me."

Hem snorted a half-laugh at the absurd request. "What?" Was he making jokes at a time like this? Hemery sang with her sister to pass the time, to Hëli when lulling her to sleep, and to Dwalin's viola on rare occasions when he brought it to dinner. She never sang in Thorin's company.

"Somehow this smelly stable and the blood seeping from my toxic wounds make me wistful for some faraway land," he replied, not without sarcasm. His remaining wit gave her comfort.

"Hanah's the singer, not me."

"I hear you when you and your sister come in at night. Your voices echo all the way down the hall."

She almost blushed at the thought. It was their favourite thing after a long day, she admitted, to slowly ascend the stairs and raise their voices, distorted under the high ceiling. But only when no one was around. She knew it was not always pretty; they just enjoyed the strength of their sound.
"Transport me with a verse—if you would be so kind," he added, smirking.

With the lump in her throat, she did not know if she could produce anything close to a song. And even in this late hour, she was embarrassed to sing to Thorin.

"Please." He brought her hand back to his mouth, kissing her knuckles.

Hem tried to clear her constricted throat, but it did not feel any better. When she began, it came out gravelly and dark, almost without tune.

Pray, give me ink and paper
I wish to pen a letter
And thou will sense and witness
That I will love none better
Soon fire will eat us all
Soon sun will slow its crawl
Dove lose its wings and fall
Ere I leave you here, My Dear.
I used to play the golden dice
I used to play the lute
At once old sorrows left me
Like air flows from the flute
Soon fire will eat us all
Soon sun will slow its crawl
Dove lose its wings and fall
Ere I leave you here, My Dear.

Hemery noticed his grip on her hand loosen. She looked down at his face. It was calm in unconsciousness. Had she not known the poison clawing at his heart with the dull talons of a slow death, had she not seen the blood drenched breeches, and had she not felt his cool, clammy palm on hers—she may have found his visage relaxed and peaceful.

The lump in her throat choked her, rising and expanding until sobs broke free on their own.

"No, no, no—Thorin?" Tears escaped her eyes. "No, don't leave me. Don't—don't—" Her stuttering voice was compressed into a desperate whine. She forced herself to be as quiet as possible. They were still in danger from the orcs.

Hem felt for Thorin's pulse. It was still there. But she did not know how long it would remain.

Suddenly, a clamour rose outside. Her grip on his coat tightened, her body tense as a fox trap.
Screeches, weapons on armour, howling of wargs, voices of men and dwarves, outrage, hysterics, and after a few moments—nothing.

Carefully, Hemery untangled herself from Thorin, reluctantly leaving the warmth of his company, and peeked out through the dirty glass.

The streets were empty. Could she venture out to look for help? She turned the idea over in her mind when she noticed something glinting in the dirt.

Thorin's sword.

Hemery cursed. How could she have left it there? Granted, she had been fairly occupied with taking shelter at the time. But she could go get it now; she could protect them with a sword. Now they had nothing.

As silently as possible, Hemery exited the stable. The cold air assaulted her cruelly, as if the world itself had become dangerous and unhospitable during this night. Swiftly, she ran across the yard, picking up the sword. It was heavy, but with two hands, she had no problem wielding it. She could tell it was elf made and therefore lighter than any other kind of blade of equal size.

Without examining it further, she turned, scanning her surroundings. Where had everyone gone? Were the men and dwarves defeated? Were the orcs raiding the temple at that very moment, butchering children and old folks in droves? Hemery's heart clenched.

Like wraiths, more orcs crawled out of the darkness toward her. Fear trickled down her spine like ice water. Absently, she reflected that Dwalin should have taught her stealth techniques as well as defense training.

She could not return to the stables and lead them straight to Thorin. She had to draw them off, perhaps manage to slip away to hide somewhere, or come across some of her allies. But she could not leave Thorin alone. Surely, someone must have survived. Or had they not? The thought threatened to drown her. Her breaths grew shallow as the orcs crept nearer, in no hurry to kill her. Perhaps they liked a bit of sport between slaughtering children.

Anger clutched her chest in an icy fist. She raised Thorin's sword slowly, preparing herself to swing it, getting as sense of the blade as a tool to be used. Trust yourself. Rely on your training. Keep moving. She was not going to make it easy for them.

"How much do you value your life?" she hissed through her teeth, as much to herself as to the orcs.

They came at her one and one. Her sword had a longer reach, and the orcs employed little strategy when it came to blocking. Hemery used their forceful, head-on, berserker fighting style against them, channeling their own strength and speed as momentum for her strikes. But they were too many; she could never catch her breath. Too late, she realised that was their main strategy.

Her arms and legs burned from exertion when she at last failed to dodge a blow. She countered with the sword to avoid the orc's sharp blade, but the orc was too strong, and she was thrown off her feet.

Her lungs dispelled air at the hard impact. Temporarily paralysed, she fully expected something sharp to hit her any moment.

But nothing did. The orc was distracted, backing away suddenly. Then a strong, hoarse voice cried out in attack, the kind of sound that makes your blows stronger and your opponent weaker. Hem recognised that voice.
Rolling over, Hemery watched as Vannur cut down the orc with their own technique—explosive power aimed forward. Surprised, the remaining orcs were hesitant to advance, circling the females like foxes waiting for a chance to bite at a deer's hindquarters. They would not wait forever.

Vannur pulled Hemery to her feet with one hand.

"You faced worse odds in the assembly today, Miss Skinner. Don't tell me you've given up already?"

Hemery could not help but bark a short laugh. Leave it to dwarves to find the humour in dire circumstances.

"I'd rather wrestle orcs than bureaucrats any day," Hem replied, keeping up the charade while struggling to take control of her breathing.

"That's the spirit." Hem could hear the grim smile in Vannur's voice, though they stood back to back, daring the orcs to come closer.

Hemery registered movement on the roof above them. An orc was about to come down right on top of them, but before he could jump at them, he was shot by an arrow, falling face first into the mud.

Hemery whipped her head around to see a squadron of dwarves on horseback approaching. The archer was at the front.

A lump formed in Hemery's throat.

It was Kili. And Dwalin rode next to him.
Unexpected Deals

By morning, it was all over. Hemery's feet were cold, her shoes soaked through with muddy water. The sky was fittingly overcast, the grey skies matching her mood.

She was tired but did not know if she was supposed to go to sleep at the inn or be watchful of further developments. She was no soldier, and she was unfamiliar with the procedures following battle.

Aimlessly, Hemery walked around, seeing people rushing back and forth, supporting the wounded, carrying casualties, mending broken doors, and collecting horses. Even if she had the strength or presence of mind to help, she would not have known where to start.

"There ye are, ladybug," Dwalin boomed suddenly from a few yards away.

Tears of exhaustion wet her eyes. They came together in a hug in the middle of the street. Hemery's shoulder ached like an old burn, and she kept the arm close to her chest.

"Dwa," she mumbled into the fur at his neck. It sounded like a mix between his name and 'Da'. She had not planned to say it like that, but was pleased he did not seem to mind. He squeezed her harder.

"Give her the scent of misery and she tracks down chaos. I see my trainin' paid off." Dwalin gave her a look over, frowning at the black and red blood staining . . . well, everything. He prodded her shoulder. Hem flinched, hissing at the contact of his poking fingertips.

"Ye need to get that seen to," he grunted. Dwalin himself only had some bloodied knuckles and a bruised eyebrow. Other than that, he looked just like he always did.

The last of the orcs had fled when Dwalin arrived with reinforcements in the night. There had not been much of a fight after that. Hemery did not even want to contemplate the fate of the town if they had not come.

"What happened? How did you know to come here?" Hem asked.

"Kili banged on my door yesterday afternoon, claimin' the king himself requested my presence in Blackwater. And to bring three hundred dwarves ready for battle."

"Horses and all?" Hem asked, astounded. According to Thorin, Bain had been emphatic in his refusal to lend any more horses.

"Aye," Dwalin affirmed. "I was under the impression haste was essential. Turns out I was right." He glanced pointedly at the beaten and bruised people around them.

"No problems with Bain?"

"No." He shrugged, frowning. "Fíli went to talk to him personally. When the rest of us came down to the pier, the horses were ready. Why?"

Fíli must have explained the seriousness of Thorin requesting help so suddenly. Perhaps Bain had come to his senses and stopped being childish about it. Guess it did not matter.

Hemery shook her head. "Nothin'."
"Not everyday the king calls," Dwalin continued. "In fact, he hasn't addressed me in thirty years. Figured it had to be important."

"Uncle had nothing to do with it," Kíli said, appearing suddenly by Hem's side. "As soon as he saw me, Mister Dwalin grabbed me by the collar, demanding to know why I was there while you where still here." He smirked as Dwalin threw him a glare.

"Ye swore to keep her safe, remember?"

Kíli ignored him. "I tried to tell him that Thorin had put his own guard to protect you, but he would hear none of it. Almost went marching off on his own had I not promised him supplies and a horse."

"Thorin can't even take care of himself, clearly," Dwalin growled. "How could he be trusted with anyone else's safety?"

"Have you seen him?" Hemery asked them. She had not heard anything about his health since some dwarves took him away from the stables. He had still been unconscious.

Dwalin avoided her eyes, but spat on the ground as if he had accidentally crushed a peppercorn between his teeth.

Kíli frowned, eyes grave. "Yes," he said finally.

"Well, how is he?"

"He'll live."

Hem's eyes widened, expecting something worse. Was that not good news?

"Where is he?" she instinctively began to move down the street.

Kíli grabbed her arm, stopping her.

"He's at the inn. The healers have treated him as best they could. He's resting."

"Can I see him?"

"You need to be treated yerself," Dwalin said. "I'll not answer to Hanah if ye loose the use of yer arm."

"I want to see for myself that he's safe," she said, trying to continue on her way.

"He won't see ye," Dwalin said decisively.

Hemery stopped. "What do you mean? Is he unconscious still?"

"He doesn't want ye there."

Heat and ice clashed in her stomach for an instant. She opened her mouth to protest, but any wish from her part to see his face or hear his voice would be irrelevant if he did not want to see her.

"You talked to him?" she asked instead, carefully. She was afraid of asking outright if he had said those exact words.

"Aye, we did." Dwalin nodded. "Just before I ran into you here." He stood there, as if waiting for
her to absorb the information.

"So—he's awake and . . . lucid?"

"Quite," Kíli replied. "It'll be a week before he can ride again and return home, but . . . yeah, he's well enough, though in some pain."

"But he'll want to recuperate and rest without disturbances, right?" Hem guessed.

"I suppose," Kíli said.

Hem relaxed. It was just temporary, she presumed. Everything would return to normal when he was better.

"Though Mister Low was going in to see him after us to discuss practical matters regarding the town," Kíli went on.

Hemery stiffened.

"Now there's someone who should sit at the head of Blackwater's council table," Dwalin interjected.

"You might not say that if you'd seen him in the dungeons of Erebor," Kíli offered with a lopsided smile. "He doesn't like dwarves better than any other wretch in this place does."

"Only known him a few hours, but I can tell there's fire in his heart," Dwalin explained. "Reminds me of old man Bard. Fierce with a sword—ye know, for a man."

He elbowed Kíli and both cracked up laughing.

The dwarves' musings passed Hemery by. Her thoughts dwelled in one particular spot.

Thorin would see Kíli, Tarren, and even Dwalin whom he could not stand under normal circumstances, but not her?

A thought struck her then, a treacherous sense of wrongdoing on her part—a gnawing notion of offense against the king. She knew it was absurd to think that her actions during the moment in which she, and she dared say he as well, thought they were going to die would stay in his mind as a transgression. She was confused.

It was just a kiss. Quite violent and intense, but still just a kiss.

Thorin had also done and said some things that were not appropriate exchanges between king and commoner. But anything he did could naturally be excused—he was the king. Hemery on the other hand was always buried under the weight of social conventions.

Or perhaps he blamed her for his injury. He had been protecting her and Asta when it happened. Hemery's mind betrayed her as a wave of guilt washed over her, colouring everything red. Perhaps if she had done as Thorin said, he would be walking right now.

Damn it. She wanted to kick something.

"Hem? What's the matter?" Kíli's words reached her.

She sighed, feeling a needle piercing her chest as useless frustration filled her.
"Fine," she hissed. "If the king explicitly wishes it, I'll leave him alone."

She was about to turn on her heel and walk off, but Kíli intercepted and gently steered her towards the healers' tent.

"That's . . . fine," Kíli said carefully, pacifying, clearly not sure where her mind was at the moment. "You don't have time for diplomacy anyway. You need to take care of yourself."

"And I'll not come to court when we get back either, not unless he personally asks me to," she continued in a huff.

"That's your prerogative," he agreed, nodding sagely.

"Shouldn't you rest?" Hemery asked Kíli, remembering he had been travelling to Erebor and back. Dwalin did not seem at all tired, continuing on his way, barking orders left and right.

"How long have you been awake?"

"Oh, I can't even recall," he chuckled. "I'd slept maybe three hours when Uncle woke me in the middle of the night, telling me to go back home."

It seemed Thorin did heed her advice after all. A small comfort.

"Aren't you tired?"

"Absolutely exhausted," Kíli admitted. "But don't tell Dwalin. He'll make me shoe horse hooves till the cows come home for even thinking about sleep while Uncle is bedridden."

"I think the orcs scared off all the cattle, so that'll be a long time."

In the days after the battle, the men of Blackwater seemed to let go of any old vexations towards the dwarves. The atmosphere was low but relieved in the broken town. Everyone present, men and dwarves, helped repair the worst of the damage, preparing the dead for the afterlife, and ridding themselves of the orc bodies in an old, unused quarry, burying them with dirt and stone.

Hemery heard that an agreement had been made between Thorin, the Iron Hill dwarves, and the new council. She had not sought to be present at negotiations, nor had she been called to any. Instead, she spent her days making cheap shoes, using leather provided by the butchers and selling the finished products back to them for a fraction of their regular price—practically giving them away. Hem had nothing better to do, and people were in dire need for basic supplies. Her shoulder was killing her, but she laboured on silently. Plenty of others suffered worse than her.

On the fifth night, she shared supper with Kíli. That was when she learnt of the deal struck between dwarves and men. She only half listened to the details when he relayed them, summing it up as basically the same settlement that Thorin had aimed for from the start.

"Are you listening?" Kíli spattered her face with water from his fingers.

Hem winced, pulling her drink, which he had used as ammunition, towards her.

"That's insanitary," she hissed in disgust.

"We're going home," he claimed, ignoring her disapproval.
"What?"

"Work teams will be dispatched as soon as word reaches the mountain," Kíli explained. "We're bringing in builders from Esgaroth as well. A lot of work for a lot of people. This will be good for everyone. Well, except for the mourners, of course. Terrible business this orc attack." His eyes flickered between his plate and her face, sheepish.

He seemed to be worried she would take offense, perhaps claiming he had no right to trivialise it as a business opportunity, but she was well aware that he had seen his share of orcs—more than enough for his long lifetime. She had no spark to argue with him tonight.

But that did not stop her from taking a drink of his ale rather than sipping on her own water which had been soiled by his grubby fingers.

"Consequently, we'll be on our way tomorrow," Kíli stressed once more, patiently taking his ale back out of her hands.

"You said Thorin would need rest for a week before travelling."

"You think anyone can keep him somewhere he does not wish to be?" He snorted with dry humour, shaking his head. "No, no. If Uncle says he's ready to go, we'll go."

"He'll drop in a dead faint from his horse before admittin' weakness, won't he?" she asked rhetorically, rubbing her forehead to disguise the worry sneaking into the creases there.

"He's too stubborn to faint." Kíli grinned through a bite of bread and goat cheese, smearing white crumbs over his lips.

Hemery pursed her lips in reluctant amusement. "He's as humble as you are charmin', dear Prince."

With a chuckle, he finished chewing, seemingly contemplating something. He turned serious for a moment.

"Did something happen while I was away?" he asked.

Surprised, and not knowing how to answer, she simply stared at him. Nothing suitable came to mind, and wishing an answer to magically appear on her lips turned fruitless, so she found herself stupidly stalling.

"Uhm . . . Happen?"

"Besides the obvious, of course," Kíli added, motioning with his table knife to her shoulder. "You're acting very odd. You as well as Uncle."

"Why? What did he tell you?" she asked a bit too quickly.

He narrowed his eyes at her, suspicious. "Nothing. He wouldn't say."

"Well then," she tried to settle nonchalantly, but he did not swallow.

"Hem, just tell me. If something's wrong, I can help."

She found herself laughing suddenly, but dampened it when she saw he was sincere.

"No," she said shortly, clearing her throat of any remaining giggles. "As you said, no one can make Thorin change his mind."
"I never said that," he protested. "I said no one can make him do anything against his will. But you can influence him, if you put your mind to it. That's why this falling out between the two of you worries me."

Hem locked eyes with him, seeing genuine concern in Kíli. She wondered, when she had no way of reaching her sister, if Kíli could understand her position. Would he think she overstepped her bounds by being so familiar with his uncle? Would he blame her for Thorin's injuries if she told him what happened during the battle? Would he think less of her because of these things?

Tugging at a small piece of dry skin on her lip with her teeth, she searched for the right words. Kíli's brown eyes were open and expectant. Could she just come out and say that she loved his uncle, and that she resented that she was not allowed to see him when he was hurt? Just as she drew breath to speak, Dwalin sat down next to them.

"Can't wait to get out of this shithole," he growled, dumping two plates of food and a jug of beer heavily on the table. "Not a barrel of decent pipe weed for miles around."

Hemery and Kíli sank back in their seats as Dwalin dominated the conversation. The moment for confessions was gone.

The original party of fifty dwarves was ready to leave at dawn. The remaining three hundred—a few less due to casualties—stayed to continue the reconstructions as they waited for proper builders to arrive.

Bror and Vannur flanked Hemery as she sat astride her horse right behind Kíli in the procession, waiting to set off. The weather had been fine all week. Naturally, on the day of their departure, it rained. At breakfast, Hem had asked Kíli if they would postpone their journey to await more favourable travel conditions, but he just shook his head with a rueful smile.

"Uncle says we go . . ." he said, shrugging.

"We go," Hem finished.

So here they were, all ready to move out. Only one missing was the king.

Random raindrops hit Hemery's face under her raised hood, beginning to really annoy her, when she heard the creak of the inn door. Thorin appeared, Dwalin at his back. It looked like Dwalin had helped him to the door, but was held back now, not allowed to assist the king in front of others.

She was glad Thorin accepted Dwalin's presence and aid, but it still stung a little that hers was not wanted. He claimed she was free to sit at his fire, but apparently she could not sit at his sickbed. Bloody dwarves.

Gingerly, Thorin made his own way to his horse with only a walking stick to help him. It took a while, but no one spoke as they waited. As Hem worriedly witnessed him pull himself onto his horse with upper body strength only, jarring creeps ran up her legs in the same places she knew his wounds were tearing on his legs at the very moment.

Why could he not have waited until he was completely recovered? Stubborn, bloody dwarves.

The ride home was wet and cold. They stopped once, only long enough to eat something warm before being on their way again. This time, Thorin had to accept Dwalin's help to get on his horse.
Hemery was in a foul mood all day, not conversing with anyone, barely giving heed to address. The ground was too soft beneath the horses' hooves, they could not move as fast as she would have wanted them to. Her hands were numb, chilled to the bone in her soaked gloves. The dark forest seemed to close in around them.

She vaguely remembered greeting her sister in the evening as they finally arrived at the gate of Erebor. Hanah's hands were like glowing embers leading Hemery into the comfort of her own chambers, magicking hot water into a bathtub, and helping her out of her wet clothes. Hem's own fingers would not obey her.

When Hanah left her, promising supper to be brought, Hem slowly came round, lying chin deep in the tub. The water made her sleepy, but surprisingly, Hem felt more present than she had all day. Of course, Hanah had made a fuss about her shoulder which now ached dully as her joints and limbs came to life again. The half-healed stitches glared an angry red, and the bruising surrounding it was fading purple and yellow.

Despite everything, it felt good to be home.

"She's clean, warm, fed, and safe in her chambers," Hanah said as she settled beside Fíli in their bed, pulling the blankets over herself. "Finally," she added with a sigh.

"Do you think you'll sleep alright now for the first time in a fortnight?" Fíli teased.

"That depends. Are you requestin' my attention tonight for some reason?" she countered slyly.

Not being able to resist an innuendo, Fíli caressed her side down beneath the covers, still innocently enough over her shift.

"I know you're sick of me saying this, but you know you have to let her go at some point."

Hanah turned serious in a heartbeat. "I know you mean well," she said respectfully. "But she's my little sister. I'll never just 'let her go'."

"It may not even be your choice. One day she may want to leave."

"She already did. And then she came back. She belongs here with me, with us—our family," Hanah stated pragmatically.

Fíli looked down at his hand stroking her arm, growing more solemn.

"What if . . ." he began. "Suppose she had to leave Erebor for some reason. How would you cope?"

Hanah snorted self-deprecatingly. "You've seen me coping these last two weeks. I've been jumpy like a hen in a wolf den. I thought I would have a seizure when Kíli showed up—"

She stopped herself, squeezing her eyes closed briefly, banning the thoughts from her mind.

"No, I'm not thinkin' about it anymore. It's over now," she said decisively.

"Well, sort of," Fíli agreed hesitantly, glancing at the ceiling now.

Hanah opened her eyes to peer at him. "What do you mean?" she asked, her whole body tensing.
"You know we've had some issues with Esgaroth these last few . . . years?"

"What does that have to do with anythin'?" she asked, her voice sharp in fear of some unknown threat.

"Bain did not want to give us the horses we needed to go to Blackwater."

"I'm aware of the pissing-contest between Bain and Thorin. Their pride exceeds their sense—as is the case with all powerful men, I might add—but I don't see how this is relevant to the issue at hand. Why do you say it's not over, and what does it have to do with Hem?"

She grew increasingly agitated, refusing to grasp the context of Fíli's line of thought.

"Fifty horses were all we could spare from our own stables," he continued carefully. "Thorin would not pay for more to be hired from Lake Town when he set out, and Bain was not about to give us three hundred out of the blue for nothing."

Hanah sat up and stared into the far wall, the cogs in her head working ceaselessly. Then she covered her face with her hands.

"Oh no," she groaned. "What did you talk about with Bain that day?"

She knew Bain admired her sister. Sigrid had said so on several occasions. Not that she needed confirmation from a third party, Hanah could see it for herself the few times she attended court and official gatherings where he also was included. Hem was witty, clever, unmarried, and had the king's ear. Bain would be a fool not to see her value.

"According to Thorin, Bain mentioned a wish to employ Hemery as a consultant at his own council, working for him rather than my uncle. Thorin refused," Fíli spoke softly.

Hanah breathed out in relief.

"But by the time Kíli came here a week ago," he went on, every word a struggle, "he had changed his mind."

She froze, her voice breaking. "He what?"

"They needed those horses," Fíli explained, more stressed now, holding his hands up helplessly. "Apparently, Hem insisted they send for more soldiers. You saw what she looked like just now. She could have died without those reinforcements."

Suddenly, Hanah flew out of the bed, taking a few steps towards the door, then turned to face the dwarf in her bed. She was livid, feeling her face grow hot.

"You sold my sister for three hundred horses?!"

If Fíli thought Hanah overreacted in her conclusion, he was in no rush to point it out.
Hemery stirred from her sleep. Had there been a sound to wake her?

Reluctantly, she opened her eyes, rolled over, and saw Híli standing at the foot of her bed in nothing but her shift.

"Bloody Mahal," Hem hissed, jerking in surprise. "You scared me."

She rubbed at her eyes in order to see better in the firelight.

"Apologies," said Híli softly. She did not say anything else, only stood there.

"What's the matter?" Hem forced herself to ask instead of simply dismissing child and telling her to go back to bed.

"Amad and Adad are fighting." Híli's voice was barely a whisper.

Hemery sighed. In the past, she had heard raised voices from Hanah and Fíli's rooms, but very rarely. Always uncomfortable for her to witness, she imagined it had to be far more disconcerting for Híli.

"Oh," Hem managed, not knowing what to say. "Do you want to stay here a while?"

Híli nodded, immediately crawling into the bed. Hem held up a blanket for her, helping her settle. Laying back down and closing her eyes, Hem hoped for an easy return to sleep. It seemed ages since she had enjoyed a good night of it. But she could practically feel how wide awake Híli was next to her.

Hem's shoulder ached dully as she pondered what to say to calm her.

"You know it never lasts, right?" Hem asked, keeping her eyes closed. "Just because people fight doesn't mean they don't love each other."

Híli was quiet a moment.

"Like you and Uncle Thorin?"

Hem's eyes flew open. What had the child heard?

"Adad says you fight because you care, and if you didn't care, you wouldn't fight so much, so it's better to fight sometimes than not fight at all."

Hem was taken aback.

"Well . . . there are different kinds of carin', but I guess that's one way to look at it. Point is that your ma and da love each other very much, and they'll have everythin' sorted by mornin'."

She rubbed Híli's arm comfortingly before settling back against her pillow.

Since Thorin did not even want to see her anymore—not even to fight about whatever she had done to displease him—did that mean he did not care?
Breakfast with Hanah, Fíli, and Híli was tense. No one spoke, not even Híli. She had to sense the remaining awkwardness between her parents just like Hemery did.

When Híli had finished her meal, Hanah encouraged her to go wake up her uncle before heading to class this morning.

As soon as Híli left the room, Fíli moved to get up as well.

"Stay," Hanah commanded, shocking Hem who stared as Fíli sunk back down in his seat. But he did not seem to object.

"Now, tell her," Hanah continued, casting a pointed glance in Hem's direction.

Fíli closed his eyes briefly with a sigh, his hands resting flat on the table.

Hem stiffened. She had just managed to survive a hoard of orcs; her stomach could not handle more trouble.

"There's something you should know," he began, meeting her eyes.

"Don't tell me there's another crisis, please," she whined, rubbing her eyebrows.

"The label of the situation is . . . debatable," he swerved, looking nervously at Hanah. "Nevertheless, it does involve you so . . . I must tell you how it was that Dwalin and Kíli were able to come to your aid."

Hemery watched him, confused.

"Thorin and Bain do not care much for each other, as you know, but Uncle was forced to come to terms with him in order for Kíli to acquire the horses he needed to bring reinforcements to Blackwater. All he had to do was give Bain permission to . . . hire you."

Hemery stared at him. She had a difficult time taking in his careful words and the contrast of Hanah's hard face that suggested the end of days. She felt a growing hollowness in her chest as she absorbed the implication.

"Hire?" Hem asked. "On contract, like a farm hand?"

"More in an advisory capacity."

"Advice with what?" What help could she be? Granted, Bain had asked her to come work for him before, but she had always seen it as jest on his part.

"Whatever Bain deems necessary."

It did not make sense. Was that Thorin's payment to Bain? That was way too vague for Hemery's liking. She needed a specific rendition of the agreement.

"Will Thorin keep the horses?" she asked.

"What? No," Fíli replied, confused. "We don't have the facilities to hold that many animals on the mountain simply for transportation purposes."

"So how much does he actually owe Bain for those seven days of hire?"
Fíli glanced at his sister.

"Go on," Hanah urged him.

"Bain won't accept money. Apparently he has not forgiven Thorin for refusing his own requests in the past."

"He wants to court you, obviously!" Hanah exclaimed suddenly. She had clearly had enough. "And what better way than to remove you from any relations here and put you in his own house?"

"He could do that anyway," Fíli protested, but did not challenge her stare.

"Well, now—thanks to you and your uncle—he can do it on his own terms."

Fíli continued patiently. "I'll not pretend to know Bain's reasons, but I know he could use you, Hem—I mean, someone with your skills," he amended quickly. "You know his problems as well as anyone. His council is a pack of fat merchants whose only interests are to line their own pockets, his treasury leaks like a sieve, and criminals run the city."

"Aye, sounds like a wonderful change of scenery," Hanah scoffed from across the table.

"You could do some good work there, Hem. Make a real difference to a lot of people. This is the first time Bain has reached out to us for genuine help, as opposed to financial band aids, tax cuts and other nonsense. And he's asked for you."

"I'm not surprised he did," Hanah muttered, clearly still seething.

"It was a decision made under pressure. Could I have persuaded Bain some other way?" Fíli shrugged. "Probably. But not without turning to threats, and it had to be done quickly, so—regretfully—I took the easy way. I don't want to see you go, either. But you would be doing Erebor a great service if you did."

Hemery rolled her aching shoulder, thinking.

Fíli could drape Bain's request in as many fine words of honour he pleased. Fact remained; Thorin had offered her services to the lord of Lake Town, like an exchange of goods. And she would not easily be able to undo it—the king's word was the king's word, equal to any law or mandate decreed through the stone inscriptions in the walls of the mountain.

What would happen now? She had just returned to Erebor. She did not want to leave. The thought alone made her eyes burn.

"Forgive me, I—I need . . . I need to go." Hemery left Hanah and Fíli without another word.

Hurrying down the corridor, she hardly registered the person coming the other way before he was right by her.

"Morning," Kíli chimed, clearly on his way to the breakfast room. When she did not acknowledge him, he grabbed her arm which she promptly pulled back forcefully. "Woah, what's the matter?" he exclaimed, holding up his arms as if shielding himself from a rearing horse.

"Did you know about this? About Bain?"

Kíli frowned, burdened by such a question at the early hour. "Bain? Tall, fair shot, lucky with cards, unlucky with women. Anything in particular, or should I go on?"
"His deal with Thorin? The one you facilitated," she pushed impatiently.

His head seemed to hurt now from all the thinking. Perhaps he had been drinking when they got home to Erebor last night?

"Uh, nothing. Uncle sent me away with haste. Just said to tell Bain that he agreed."

"And you didn't know to what?" she questioned, suspicious. Did he really not know what he had done?

Kíli sighed, throwing his hands up tiredly. "Listen, it was the middle of the night. I assumed it was important. I just do as I'm told—"

Hemery hit him. Not hard enough to do any damage, just the flat of her palm against his cheek making a satisfactory smack echo in the corridor.

Kíli recoiled, stepping back, more surprised than angry. "What in the name of Mahal's bloody cock was that for?"

"For being such a good little soldier," she spat, scathingly. "Never askin' any questions—just doin' what you're told!"

She spun on her heel, stomping down the corridor.

"Be careful in there," she called over her shoulder. "My sister probably has a few words for you, as well. I'd keep her at arms-length if I were you."

Hemery was halfway down to the entry hall before she stopped in the middle of the stairs. Glancing back, she noticed Vannur and Bror shadowing her. Apparently, Vannur had not been recalled from her duties of guarding Hemery since they returned. Both dwarves must be wondering what she was doing, and Hem felt her cheeks grow warm. From embarrassment or irritation, she did not know or care.

Where was she going anyway? Hem guessed she had been on her way to see Dwalin, but what could he do but throw a fit just as she wanted to do at the moment? Just like before she left for Blackwater, she sought Dwalin out to seek reassurance, to seek sympathy, but she could not expect him to solve her problems. She knew what she had to do.

Vannur caught Hemery's hand when she raised it to knock. The dwarf's determined grip told Hem that her aim might have been too forceful to be productive.

"Allow me, Miss," Vannur offered. Her rap was short but sharp on the king's door.

Hem felt an anticipatory thrill battle with restless frustration and hopeless indignation in her gut. Would Thorin see her this time? She decided she did not care. The purpose of her visit was not the pleasure of his company; she was entitled an explanation.

There was no answer.

"Once is enough," Vannur said when Hem's hand twitched with the urge to knock again.

After a moment, Hem finally heard a muted, "Enter", through the thick wood.

Vannur opened the door but stayed outside with Bror as Hem passed through, closing it behind her.
Thorin's study was empty. Hemery guessed he could be readying himself for the day—it was early
still—and his injuries made him slower than usual.

Reining in her emotions, she looked around. There was a nice fire burning, making the room as
homey as any other on the third floor but utterly belying the uncomfortable conversation that was
about to take place in it.

Hem sat down by the fire like the last time she was there. If nothing else, she knew she was
allowed that much.

"I was not expecting you so soon," Thorin spoke from the inner rooms.

Turning her head, Hem saw him in the doorframe, supported by a walking stick. He entered the
room, taking slow steps hidden by the sweeping sway of Hanah's coat. She should not call it
Hanah's coat anymore, she reminded herself—it belonged to the king like everything else.

He looked very old. A big contrast to Thorin the commander she witnessed in the fray of combat
only a week ago. Did he know why she had come?

When he finally reached the fireplace and sat down heavily in the chair opposite her, she got out of
hers, starting to pace up and down the carpet.

Thorin said nothing, merely watched her agitated movements—patiently or disinterested was hard
to tell. Always the model of self-control, she fumed.

Hemery stopped and folded her arms.

"Where you goin' to tell me?" she asked.

"I was hoping I would not have to. Apparently, I did not need to. Pray tell me, was it Hanah or
Dwalin who figured it out?" he drawled indifferently.

"Hanah," she replied but quickly continuing. "So you'd ignore it, thinkin' it might go away?"

He did not acknowledge her accusation, but stirred the logs in the grate distractedly. "She is clever,
your sister," he mused, sighing. "Never given her enough credit."

"How long would you wait to tell me that you had made a deal with Bain that would force me to
leave my family and friends to go live and work as Mahal knows what in Lake Town? How long,
Thorin?"

He looked at her then, as if realising for the first time that she was in the room. A long moment
passed before he replied, a crease settling between his eyebrows.

"I do not know," he said. "As long as I could."

Hem groaned, turned, and completed a turn about the room before stopping again.

"Why? What does he want?"

"He probably wants to hurt me with these stipulations," Thorin said.

"Hurt you?" she echoed in anger. "What about me? I'm not a pawn you can barter with."

He looked away, rubbing his brow, resisting her verbal assault, almost as if he went back to
ignoring her presence altogether.
"When I refused the first time—" he began.

"The first time?" How many times had they talked about this?

"Right before we left for the ridge," he explained. "I thought Bain realised it would never happen, but his condition remained."

She remembered Thorin's words from that morning in her room, that Bain wanted something he could not give him. Guess Thorin changed his mind. What exactly would she have to do to pay the debt owed by the king? Her king. Hem almost snorted at the absurdity.

"What is expected of me now?" she asked.

"To honour the deal, you would be Bain's advisor, similar to your arrangement with me."

But she had never been asked about that either. She had never been in Thorin's employ.

"We don't have an arrangement," she protested. "We never did. You summon me whenever you wish, that's it. You're not even payin' me!"

"Bain will," he settled, refusing to rise to her aggressive tone. "If you agree, that is."

"Oh, so I do have a say after all?" she asked dryly.

Thorin frowned. "Of course you do," he said emphatically. "Despite what it may sound like, you will not be forced to go against your will."

But what would happen to the credibility of the king's word if it was not honoured?

"Free will is a treacherous thing," she said. "Guilt and persuasion can sway anyone to do anythin'."

Thorin spoke between his teeth. "I'll be damned before I persuade you to work for Bain. However, I do not deny that a refusal will have consequences."

"But it would not be a breach on my part since I have agreed to nothin' in the first place," Hem claimed.

"Agreed. And I would not mention it unless I believed it to be an issue which you concern yourself with greatly."

He paused, his jaw working beneath his beard.

"It is a double-edged sword," he said apologetically, shaking his head slowly.

True. If Hemery refused, she thereby forced Thorin to break a promise to a fellow head of state. If she agreed, she would submit herself as a commodity available for transaction. Her life would indeed be 'forfeit' as Bain so bluntly put it last time she met him. Her heart sank.

"How—" she cleared her throat. "How long would I have to stay in Esgaroth?" she asked, afraid of the answer.

Thorin broke eye contact, staring into the fire.

Indefinitely, Hem concluded. She felt a growing hollowness in her chest.

"There is . . . one other alternative," Thorin said hesitantly, tilting his head.
Hem stood up straighter, eager to listen.

"What? What is it?"

"If you were to . . . find a position in Erebor that takes precedence over your duty to the crown."

What did that mean?

"An occupation?" she asked, confused.

"Of a sort."

She thought about this. What did dwarves value more than fulfilling their duty to the king? They were warriors and crafters, and they treasured rarities like jewels and . . . children.

If she were a mother, would she be allowed to stay? Bloody Mahal. To what lengths did she have to go? Hem blushed at the thought.

"Would I have to . . . bear a child?" She stared at him, unsure if that was indeed his meaning.

Thorin met her eyes then, brows raised in surprise.

Hem looked away, cheeks burning.

"No," he replied. "But . . . come to think of it, it would not hurt if you did, to be perfectly honest. Nevertheless—" He coughed, seemingly checking himself and gathering his thoughts. "No one could blame you for refusing Bain's offer if you were to marry a citizen of Erebor."

Now it was Hem's turn to gape in bewilderment.

"Marry?"

"Aye. You will never be expected to part from your husband to live in another city."

It sounded too easy. Probably because it was not easy at all, Hem decided. Thorin made it sound easy. Just marry someone. Sure. Upturn her entire life to accommodate King Thorin. Why not?

"I might as well pack my bags today then," she stated, laughing tensely.

Thorin frowned. "No, listen to me—you do not have to. You have options."

"No, I don't!" She shook her head. "I'll have to surrender my life whatever I choose." She tightened her fists, feeling her nails cut into the skin of her palms. Was Thorin trying to make her life difficult on purpose?

"Is this a test?" she asked suddenly.

"Excuse me?"

"Are you still scrutinisin' my behaviour, puttin' my loyalty to the test after my absence?"

His gaze intensified, the weight of it relaying the gravity of his words which were low and precise.

"Your deduction astounds me. That I would be to blame for your exile as it were, that anyone of my people would pay the price for the safety we bestowed on Blackwater—the very notion sickens me. Alas, that was the bargain made. A bargain you yourself insisted on, that I call for three
hundred men, no matter the circumstances. A bargain we came to need desperately. I do not even dare contemplate how you could predict such a turn of events, but I am glad you did. Without it, we would be dead."

Hemery blanched. What was he talking about?

"I predicted?"

"You begged me for those men," Thorin reminded her. His tone turned harsh from annoyance at her interruption or perhaps emotions spilling over in recollection of the bloodshed.

Either way, it seemed she should have remembered that particular conversation, but she did not. Many of those days she spent in Blackwater were hazy and laced in anxiety. She did remember the nightmares she suffered during her stay. If she had believed them to be real, that might have compelled her to make such a request of the king. But she had not . . . had she?

Thorin continued.

"I take full responsibility for the consequences, which is why I delayed informing you. I could not even bear to look at you."

Something stabbed Hemery's chest.

"Because I forced you to become indebted to Bain?"

His face darkened. "You know that is not true."

"Oh, please," she huffed. That look might have scared her when she was younger, but not anymore. "It kills you that he had the upper hand for once. You'd marry me off just to remain in total control —so no one can challenge you."

"I was ashamed," he growled. "That's why I could not see you. What good is my power if I cannot release you from this contract?" He sighed. "Thus far, this is the only alternative I can conjure."

Hemery could see genuine struggle in his countenance, but it was not enough to quell her frustration.

"And the only way for me to remain here is if my duties are tied to Erebor as a wife—the only legitimate post for a woman and therefore unquestionable." Her opinion on this logic was evident in the curl of her lip and the acid of her tongue.

"As blood relation to the heir of Durin," he stated pragmatically, "you can have your pick of men as well as dwarves in the three cities and beyond. You may choose someone you . . . respect and . . . value." He had trouble with meeting her eye and finding his words.

"Choosin' between bein' chained to the household of a husband or to an employer who will pay me for my efforts, I think I'll choose the latter." That sounded logical enough.

Thorin leaned forward, seemingly incensed that she could consider Bain's offer.

"When you barged in here demanding justice, it sounded like you would do anything to stay in Erebor. Tell me, is it your pride or your loyalty speaking?"

Hemery was seeing red.

"My loyalty to Erebor is the only reason we're still havin' this discussion. My pride is essentially
gone at this point."

"But you will not compromise your pride to maintain your loyalty and stay?"

She wanted to strangle him, but she refused to show it, keeping her voice cool.

"You demand loyalty of all but pledge none in return. I forgot—the king is the only one who's
allowed to profit from any given situation. The rest of us have to bow and scrape and be ever so
grateful for every crumb that falls off your table." She stared hard at him. "I will not marry in order
for you to save face."

Thorin sat back, as if in deep thought.

"So this is what you truly think?" he asked after a moment.

"That's what happens when you turn individuals into currency. Opinions turn as cold and hard as
gold."

"I do not recall you complaining when that currency saved you from being violated, slaughtered,
and eaten by orcs—and not necessarily in that order, I might add. My only wish was to keep you
safe, an issue I raised before we even set out. But my efforts seem doomed to weightlessness since
you did not listen. And I was not abundantly helpful in the last hours of that bloodbath, as you well
know."

Hemery flinched. "You did not just . . ." A lump formed in her throat. "Are you implyin' that your
injury was my fault or that I have only myself to blame?"

Thorin raised himself from his seat, his frame radiating fury.

"I'm implying nothing of the sort! I'm trying to find a solution." He paused, taking a calming
breath, then continued. "My hand was forced. I did not wish this."

"Yes, what difficult choices you must make, Sire," she hissed.

"No, it is you that must make the difficult choice now."

She turned away from him, not being able to stand his examination. She wanted to refuse them—
Bain, Thorin, everyone—and lock herself away in her room. Perhaps move back to Dwalin. But
that would not solve anything.

"You honestly cannot think of anyone you could consider a husband?" Thorin asked in a low
rumble as he sat down once more. The ire seemed to have left him, exhaustion in its place.

Hem sighed, folding her arms.

She knew she would never have a family like Hanah, with a husband who treated her like an equal,
someone she could laugh with. That was rare. But marrying might not be half bad if it was to
someone she cared for and respected.

However, the only people who fit that description were Dwalin who was like a father to her; Kíli
who was basically her brother; Bofur who was too focused on work and ale to take matters of
domesticity seriously; and Balin who would have a seizure at the mere thought of marrying a girl
of men who had seen less than twenty-three winters—even if it was only for appearances sake.

And then there was Thorin. Thorin who had said such amazing things under the influence of stress,
pain, and poison. Thorin who occupied her thoughts more than she would like to admit after her return from Blackwater. Thorin who responded to her kiss but had not spoken a word of it since, not given any sign that he even remembered it.

King under the mountain, Thorin Oakenshield, who already had an heir in Fíli, who was far too busy running a kingdom to bother with a wife, who held himself above the mundane conventions of regular folk. He would not lower himself to such pedestrian trivialities unless it suited his own agenda. They may be friends, as much as a girl can be a friend to a dwarf king, but he would surely not compromise his position of absolute power by sharing his household with a woman.

Her king.

"There's no one," she said finally, exiting his study, and ignoring the burning behind her eyelids.
Hemery thought about taking a walk, get some fresh air, but the streets of Dale carried too much people, and all other paths would tempt her toward Dwalin's house, so she refrained. She knew what he would say.

He would rage against the king's decision, but, when asked how he would act in her place, he would admit to his own readiness to follow Thorin's every directive. Thorin was his king, always would be, despite their differences. Dwalin had proved that in Blackwater; Thorin called and he answered, ready to lay down his life for the king.

And if Hem asked why Dwalin did not find it reasonable for her to follow directives as loyally, the only explanation he would be able offer would be that she was a woman. Hemery did not like that, though she admitted that was the same reason she herself had reacted so strongly to begin with. The implication of Thorin sending a male councillor to work for Bain was just not the same as sending her; she would always run a greater personal risk traveling and working away from home, away from her family—her protection.

Instead, Hemery shut herself in her chamber, locking the doors so not even Hanah could enter. She tried to distract herself with some leatherwork, but she was too agitated for production, finding herself gazing out the window, her thoughts going in circles. After a while, they turned sluggish and woolly, losing shape and direction.

A crack from the fireplace sharply brought her out of her waking slumber. Her leather knife slid out of her hand and dropped to the floor with a clang. Rubbing her eyes and looking around, she noticed it was almost dusk. She summed up the day as an accursed waste and went to bed.

Her shoulder ached as she settled under the covers. Perhaps that was why she was again plagued by nightmares when she finally succumbed to sleep.

The red flames from before morphed into dark, winding streets. Streets made of timber. Esgaroth. She ran down unfamiliar paths, but they all led back to a black door. Paint peeled by years and weather. A cat ran across her feet, as if sensing danger. Gulls cried overhead.

Then the door began to tremble, the wood straining from pressure, and the whole house swelled and cracked, rising upward until it shattered, revealing a scaled beast, tearing itself free, splintering planks and raining glass over Hem as it stretched and poised for attack.

First, she thought it was a dragon similar to the one who terrorised the mountain all those years and she had seen depicted in paintings. But this was slender, without wings and legs, coiling its long body as it gauged its surroundings with black eyes. Orc black.

It was like the water snake she had conjured for Hfli. Though her rational mind said that the snake demon was not real, it felt real and so did the fear that gripped her, making her run with all her might to escape it. She ran through maze-like streets until she reached the upward slope to Dale, trying to get away. But she could not. The monster was always right at her heels.

When she reached the gate to Erebor in her dreamscape, she suddenly froze. She could not lead the demon into her home, to her family. If she took shelter there, it would follow. She could not allow it to devour them as well as her.

Turning, she faced the beast. It rose tall before her, its belly exposed, showing dark green scales.
like glimmering jewels. Just thinking it, she suddenly had a dagger in her hand, the one Dwalin gave her ten years ago. As the snake lunged, so did she, burying the blade between the tough scales, clinging to the beast's neck. Hissing and screeching, twisting and rolling, they both tumbled into the black water of Dwalin's lake.

The still waters turned into a furious river, rushing over Hemery's head, pulling her down, and pushing her upside down. She held her breath until her lungs burned, and she opened her mouth, drawing in deep, not caring if she drowned—merely wishing to fulfil the urge to breathe. Only, she found that she could indeed breathe in that cold, crushing darkness. Gone was the demon, gone was the fire and the mist. She was alone, floating in nothing.

Just as she thought herself dead, she woke up, clawing at her sheets and blinking into the firelight, desperate to see and feel again. And though relieved at the realisation that it was a dream, she could not stop tears from wetting her pillow. She stayed like that a long moment, on her side, crying silently, too wary to go back to sleep.

Opening her eyes, she distinguished the silhouette of something on her bedside table—a small object, unfamiliar in this space. She reached out, closing her fingers around it. Round, metal. A ring. Not hers. The ring she found in Blackwater. She had not put it here. It had been in her coat. Sethie had taken it to be cleaned. She must have found the ring in its pocket and brought it back.

Firelight reflected in the stone, but only its own warm, orange glow; the stone remained devoid of colour, silvery grey like the metal. Effortlessly, it slid onto Hem's middle finger. The foreign weight a welcome distraction. The stone seemed clearer now than when she had first examined it, but the room was also dark. She could be mistaken.

She did not know how long she lay there watching it, but when she fell back to sleep, she dreamt again about the black door. Only, this time, she kept passing it, waiting in eager anticipation for it to open, but it never did.

When Bain came for her, he came alone. His guards waited outside as he was shown into the council room. In the late afternoon, it was empty except for Hemery, Hanah, and Dis.

Hem had received word that morning that Bain requested an hour of her time. Rather, it was like an advance notice, really, as he was already on his way when the message arrived. This time, there was no tea, no refreshments offered, just an empty table between him and the women. Even Tarren Low had been given a jug of water in his dungeon, Hem mused, but Hanah had scoffed at the suggestion.

"Now that he has killed any remnant of generous neighbourly spirit, he can pay for the water if he wants some. And if he's in danger of dyin' of thirst while he's here, we may just have the leverage needed to release you from Thorin's pledge," Hanah had concluded with a wry smile as they waited for Bain. Hemery had rolled her eyes while Dis chortled merrily.

But Bain did not seem thirsty when he entered the council room. At least, he had enough sense not to ask for anything.

"Welcome, Lord Bain," Dis said politely, but her features did not mirror the sentiment.

"Greetings, Lady Dis. Lady Hanah. Lady Hemery." He bowed to each in turn.

The sisters did not even attempt to correct him on the use of the titles this time.
"Sit," Dis ordered. "If you please . . ."

He did so. "I trust you are all in good health."

"Well enough," Dis replied.

"Been better," Hanah muttered.

"Thank you for your concern," Hem quickly added. "But I think we would all be grateful if you stated the purpose of your visit."

He hesitated, watching them warily. Naturally, he noticed the frosty attitude of the women.

"I gather the king has told you of our agreement?" he said directly to Hemery.

"Aye. A testament to his power as well as his imprudence, but . . . the king's word is the king's word," Hem replied ambiguously.

A frown slowly formed on Bain's forehead.

"I know how this must seem. In hindsight, I may have reacted immaturely—"

Hanah sniffed next to Hemery, but Bain pretended not to take note.

"—but I do not regret it. I have waited too long to seek aid for my problems. And since the king won't offer it freely, I bargained for it. However," he continued before Hanah's sharp inhale turned into words. "I suspect I need to clarify that the deal only extended to his willingness to be relieved of your services."

So the deal only regarded the king?

"Then Thorin—King Thorin," Hem corrected herself, "did not insure you of my participation?"

Bain offered a small smile. "The king did not sell you like one of the horses if that's what worries you. Though it doesn't surprise me that he would see it that way. Dwarves take everything so literally—" he stopped himself, clearly reminding himself of his present company.

Dis said nothing, just regarded him, unimpressed.

Bain went on. "He merely promised he would allow you to leave if you accepted my proposition."

"Which is?" Hem asked, less apprehensive now and more curious.

"I want you to be my secret police," he said simply, smirking.

Hem frowned in confusion. "I beg your pardon?"

The humour in his eyes faded as he leaned forward on his elbows. "Any attempt to stem the flow of contraband and bloodshed in my city is thwarted. I have capable soldiers, but whenever we get close to apprehend the main culprits, they slip away. It's unnerving, almost . . . predictable in its pattern."

"What do you think I can do?" she asked. She had no experience of peacekeeping in that manner.

"My captains and security officers are well known, and I trust no other in my current employ with this issue. You, on the other hand, can move about the city freely, make inquiries unnoticed. Even
if I had not witnessed first hand your astute powers of observation and deduction, you've proved yourself indispensible in King Thorin's court. If anyone can sniff out the parasites in my court, it's you."

Hemery looked at Hanah and Dis. Both women looked wary but not distrustful or dismissive. They believed he was sincere in his proposal, and they were prepared to hear him out.

Sensing their hesitation, Bain went on.

"No one knows of this bargain but us, so if you refuse, no harm will come to the king's honour. But I thought I'd try one last plot before I begin incarcerating handfuls of men for treason."

He held Hemery's eyes, and she could see the gravity of his scheme.

"I have a rat on my ship," he explained. "I'd like for you to smoke it out."

If the challenge of such a request thrilled Hemery as much as it intimidated her, she did not let it show.

Hemery told Bain that she would consider his offer. He, in turn, persuaded her to visit him in Esgaroth to discuss the matter in more detail in a day or two.

Hanah could tell the idea of helping Bain intrigued her in spite of her initial reluctance. Hemery of all people, she believed, would be first in line to volunteer if she knew something could be done to relieve Esgaroth of its poverty and criminal elements. Though no official choice had been made, Hanah saw no reason for Hem to turn from this opportunity now that the request for aid had come so respectfully and genuinely from Bain himself.

What had been thought to be a demand made for the wrong reasons turned out to be an invitation to exactly the kind of mystery Hemery loved to solve—one regarding people's actions and motives. And she would be compensated generously.

Lord Bain was a good sort of fellow, though his rule was too soft. His nature-given sentimentality was not an incurable fault. He had simply been too young when he shouldered the responsibility of an entire city. Hanah had to admit, aside from her sister being deprived Thorin's gentility of bidding her assent beforehand, what objection could she reasonably hold now? They had both suffered under worse masters—and for less money.

These thoughts remained in Hanah's mind after she had accompanied Hemery to Esgaroth for her second meeting with Bain. She was on her way home when a troubled-looking dwarf brought her out of her reveries by lingering in the corridor outside her and Fíli's chambers.

When she approached, Hanah slowed her steps, glancing at Dagrún at her side. The guard looked as surprised as she was.

"Your Highness?" Hanah ventured carefully.

Thorin straightened and turned toward her, only slightly leaning on his walking stick as if giving the impression that he did not really need it.

"Miss Hanah—I mean, Lady Hanah . . . " he began, uncommonly uncertain.
"No need for fancy titles, Sire." She smiled cordially at him.

"Though you are a lady in all but writing," he maintained.

"Miss Hanah is fine," she assured him.

When he did not speak again, she became aware of a twinge of annoyance in her gut. She had not forgiven him yet for his underhanded dealings with Bain. And what was he doing here anyway, skulking around her door? She had half a mind to send him on his way, but it would not do to shoo the king away like a stray cat.

"If you're lookin' for Fíli, he's is held up with the miners this evenin', but perhaps I can be of some assistance?"

"Miss Hanah, you are a clever sort of woman, and you and I—" He took a breath before continuing. "Well, we have known each other for some time now, have we not?"

"Yes." She nodded.

"We're . . . friends," he hazarded awkwardly. Hanah tilted her head in brief contemplation.

"Not the word I would use, Sire."

"But we have always been civil . . . Acquaintances."

That was true, so she nodded once more. "Yes, Sire."

"We are in confidence with each other."

She shook her head. "No."

"We have been known to speak, surely, on occasion?" he persisted, barely containing his frustration.

"Certainly." Hanah could hardly keep back a smile. He must be struggling with something major to subject himself to this kind of torture.

"It would not be unusual if I should inquire about your well-being?" he asked, his annoyed tone insisting on agreement.

"That would not be unheard of," she answered, though she could not recall the last time he did.

"So . . . Miss Hanah." It seemed he did not know what to do with his hands so he placed both on his cane. "How are you?" he asked in an overly formal, yet still gruff, manner.

"I'm well. Thank you, Sire. And you?" Hanah played along so she may find out the real reason for this visit. It was most amusing.

"Fine. I'm fine," he said quickly, as if wanting to wave away the question physically. "How is your day so far? How have you spent your time?"

Hanah suspected what was weighing on his mind and decided that she would enjoy watching him squirm under uncertainty. She went to her door and opened it widely.

"Please, won't you come in? I'll tell you all about it. I was just about to have some tea."
He did not answer. He merely hurried into the room like a cat sneaking into the pantry, wondering when he would be found and thrown out for his insolence. He sat down in one of the chairs by the fire, impatiently waiting for her to sit down as well.

"What have I done today?" Hanah drawled purposely.

"I spent a ridiculous amount of time in the market, hagglin' over pearls with a rude merchant who smelled of fish," she began as she arranged cups and plates that a maid had prepared for her.

"After that, I spent an hour with Lady Dis and Schoolmaster Ori in his study, tryin' to explain how my daughter and her friends came to build a fort out of crates of sacred scrolls in the old archives and accidentally set them on fire. So—that was my afternoon."

She smiled a long-suffering smile of a working mother. Thorin stared at her, nonplussed.

"And I visited Lord Bain with my sister this mornin'," she added, pouring tea.

"Oh?" A bit curious, a bit nonchalant. He kept his eyes firmly on her busy hands. He cleared his throat before continuing.

"And how fared your sister in Lake Town? Bored and miserable, no doubt."

Hanah bit her lip to keep from laughing.

"I don't think so. He showed us around and explained his duties and goings on at his court. He showed us apartments where she would be stayin' if she accepted his offer, or if she'd rather stay at a boardin' house, that would be seen to."

"So she would not live with him?"

"Fortunately, no," she replied. On that, at least, they seemed to agree.

"What about her rooms? Damp and drafty on that lake, I'm sure."

"No. It's dry and smells of dried flowers. There's paper on the walls—painted paper. Bright, clear colours. Fireplace next to her sleepin' quarters. Almost as nice as her rooms here."

He scowled then—the first straightforward expression since their conversation began.

"I said almost as nice," Hanah emphasised. She was too amused by his worries to be intimidated by him.

"And Bain himself. Would he dominate her time, forcing her to work night and day?"

"Like you?" she could not help countering. His back stiffened, and his gaze darkened, but he did not protest.

"I believe him to be a fair master," she said to answer his question, deliberately digging the knife in deeper, though he was clearly already punishing himself. But despite his discomfort, every answer spurred more inquisitiveness.

"Does he fawn over her, hoping to catch her while she is young and ripe, like a rat aiming for the breakfast table?" His scowl remained, though not directed at her anymore.

Hanah suppressed a chuckle. He sounded so much like Dwalin. Even Fíli and Kíli had commented on the lord's intentions, though carefully since Hanah still had not forgiven them for
their contributions to the whole thing.

She pretended to seriously weigh his question, wondering how much the idea of Bain courting Hemery bothered him.

"Well, he has openly showed his favour to her company. And she could do far worse, there is no doubt about that."

Thorin looked away then, leaning forward in his chair to stare into the flames and closing his hands into fists.

"But he is too dull for her taste," she admitted at last, "and more than twice her age."

"So she is convinced he is too old for her?"

"Their relationship is strictly professional, albeit friendly," she said calmly.

"None ever heard of a friendly master who was not soon duped by one," he informed her cynically.

"Then thank the gods you've never been accused of friendliness, Sire," she replied.

"Indeed," he muttered. Once again, he had no defense. "Fair enough."

Hanah leaned back, resting her hands in front of her stomach. She noticed Thorin glance at the pose. Had Fíli spilled something about them trying for another child? She would not put it past him.

"Why have you not married Fíli?" Thorin asked suddenly.

Hanah smiled patiently, masking her surprise and embarrassment at such an intimate question. He really exploited her confidence now that she had offered it.

"I don't need to," she said.

Thorin frowned, as if not following her logic. "But you are devoted to him, yes?"

He wanted to know whether she loved his nephew, but she did not feel the two questions sprung from the same well.

"Marriage is about safety," she reasoned. "Erebor is a stable nation. Fíli has an heir. He has never been required to marry for diplomacy or strategy. Because of my work, I am financially independent, and because of my daughter, my presence here has never been questioned. Not like Hem's, for example. She is more exposed now than I ever was as a common leather smith."

Taking in her words, Thorin sat back in his chair, shifting his eyes to the fire.

"Of course," Hanah went on, "until she retires from court completely, the looks and the gossip will continue, and marriage might stop people from tuggin' on her sleeves, but she would not accept any offer that—"

She was interrupted by a knock on the door. Sethie showed her face in the doorway. She looked surprised, at first, seeing the king at Hanah's tea table, but then smiled, as if reining in amusement.

"The guild is assembled downstairs, Miss Hanah."

"Thanks, Seth. I'm on my way," Hanah replied, smiling back.
She stood then, looking back at Thorin who seemed exceedingly vexed at being disturbed in their conversation.

"Excuse me, Sire. I have engagements—"

He stood up as well, placed a hand lightly on her elbow to halt her, and locked her gaze.

"Never mind that," he insisted. "What were you about to say?"

"Oh, what was I sayin'?" She thought a moment.

"Hemery would not accept an offer unless . . ." he began helpfully.

Hanah bit her lip in measured amusement. It would not do to giggle before the king, but the laughter got stuck in her throat before any escaped. She was not sure she wanted to encourage him. Thorin should definitely not be asking her these things.

She sighed.

"Hem would not accept any offer that would . . . limit her," she settled. "She has enjoyed great freedom in her life. Perhaps too much. Though Fíli and I encourage her to do whatever she wants, the disappointments later on might prove overwhelmin'. She struggles with subordination and will not settle for servin' any other master than her own heart."

When he did not ask anymore, she motioned for him to follow her out.

"You know . . . Hemery will most likely agree to Bain's offer," she said before they parted in the corridor.

She could see Thorin's mouth tightening beneath his beard, but he said nothing.

"I must ask," she said. "Are you haunted by guilt for havin' put her in a bad place, or are you afraid she'll like it so much that she won't return?"

He met her eyes evenly a long moment, giving nothing away except a determination forming in those hard eyes.

"I admit . . ." he struggled to continue. "I have treated your sister unjustly, but I swear I will rectify this, whatever it takes."

She nodded in approval. Though working for Bain might not be as bad as Hanah first feared, Thorin had treated Hemery very badly indeed.

"See to it that you do . . . Sire."
"Will you marry me?" Hemery asked Kíli one night at The Dragon's Head.

Kíli choked on his ale. He spat the mouthful back into his jug and kept coughing until he gathered enough air to reply.

"You know, Skinner, when I said I wanted you to be my drinking partner, it was not a roundabout way of asking permission to court you," he said staring at her intently.

Hem rolled her eyes. "I know that. But I was thinkin', you're not married, and I'm not married. We get along and stuff . . ."

"Get along and stuff?" He looked at her incredulous for a moment, then regretfully down at his ale before swiftly switching jugs with the one the barmaid served to the neighboring table without anyone noticing. "I can tell you've really thought this through," he said sarcastically.

"Well, sometimes one doesn't have the luxury of deep contemplation over things like this."

"Over life-altering, irrevocable things like choosing a life mate?"

"Yeah," Hem said, crossing her arms over her chest.

"So you're asking me because . . . ?"

"Because bein' married is of greater importance to women than I first realised," she grumbled, dissatisfied. "And you're the only . . ." she motioned vaguely toward him, "man I know that is available, respectable, and—how do I put this?—not a complete imbecile."

Kíli was unimpressed by the credentials presented, frowning deeply. "You're right. You must really be desperate to come to me for help. What brought this on?"

"I haven't decided if I'll go to Esgaroth or not. It's so soon after Blackwater. My shoulder hasn't even healed yet, and I'd rather not leave Hanah and Híli again. Not right away, at least—"

"Glad to know you're prepared to marry me but not miss me," he interrupted. Hem ignored him.

"And I know Bain needs help, but am I really the right person for this? I have no idea what he expects of me." She traced the grain in the table with her nail, not looking at him as she spoke. "But Thorin said that if I marry, I don't have to go anywhere on the king's command or anyone else's."

Kíli's eyebrows shot up. "Uncle said that?"

Hem was confused. "Yes, why? Is it not correct?"

He shrugged. "No, no—I'd say that would do. I'm just surprised he'd . . . think of it."

She looked at him expectantly, waiting to hear his opinion on the whole thing. He thought a moment before continuing.

"If we marry, you can't hit me anymore."

"Kee," she groaned, exasperated. He just took another swig of his drink. "I'm sorry I hit you, but—you could hardly feel it, could you?"
"That's not the point," he protested. "And you're missing the point of marriage, as well. You can't marry for convenience."

"Of course I can. It's the most common thing in the world."

"Aye, but you can't marry for convenience. You'd kill your husband or yourself within a fortnight."

He was probably right, Hem concluded, leaning her chin in her hand.

"And who are you trying to fool? You want to go to Esgaroth."

She sighed, looking down at the table again. Kíli began counting reasons on his fingers.

"Firstly, you'd piss off Uncle—"

"I don't care about that," she muttered unconvincingly, curving her lip.

"Secondly, you'd get your hen-sister off your back—"

"She's not that bad."

"Thirdly, you'd prove to everyone how clever you are, despite being wee Blackwater trash," he added with a smirk.

"Oy! Shut it, dwarrow-dud," she raised her hand to point at him, but he recoiled, shielding his jug of ale.

"Ah-ah! More courting, less hitting."

"Forget it," she snapped. "I formally retract my proposal."

He was partly right, though. Hemery could not make such a big decision just to get out of Bain's deal. Not over a drink of ale at the inn, anyway. Deciding to sleep on the matter and let it rest for now, she straightened at the table and looked around for the barmaid.

"Who do I need to marry to get a pint around here?" she muttered, waving to the bar.

"Was I your first choice?" Kíli asked.

Hem hesitated before answering, "Sure."

Kíli narrowed his eyes, unconvinced.

"Mutual respect is the foundation of a happy marriage, Mother always says," he stated, as if uttering an essential truth of the universe. "You have a lot to learn before you're worthy of courting me." He nodded sagely.

Hidden from the rest of the tavern behind her own jug, Hem stuck out her tongue at him.

The next morning, Hemery agreed to Bain's request by letter. She knew that taking on such a risky challenge so soon after her return from Blackwater could be too much to handle, but it did not stop the surge of anticipation she felt in her chest at the prospect of going to Esgaroth.

Of course, she did not relish the thought of leaving her family, but she also felt the need to
accomplish this on her own, to see if she could do without the support of Thorin and his council. This was an opportunity to prove to herself that she made a difference—that she was not just the king's pet.

And it was not forever. However, to Dwalin, it seemed as if she was bidding a final farewell.

"This is the last I'll see of ye," he said as they sat shoulder to shoulder on his front steps. "Ye'll not be comin' back. All this just to get back at Thorin."

The low rays of the sun caressed their faces on the first warm evening of spring.

"This is not goodbye," Hem replied, squinting in the sun. "I'm informin' you of the situation. That's all."

"Really?" He glared at her from the corner of his eye, unconvinced. "And how long 'til the next emergency forces ye away?"

He poked her bad shoulder meaningfully, only stopping when she winced. She had been about to say there would be no more emergencies, but they both knew she could make no such promise.

"If I had known what Thorin had promised the boatman's boy," Dwalin said, "I'd have clubbed Kíli over the head and stolen the bloody horses."

Hem scoffed. "It's not so bad. The important thing is that Bain finally will do something about the bandits on his lake. Sigrid says it's only a matter of time before they spread to Erebor like a plague."

"Bain's lazy and soft. He should've handled it years ago."

She could not argue with that.

"Ye can't go runnin' as soon as someone tells ye to jump over a ledge," Dwalin barked suddenly. "It's not yer job to clean up others' shite. Yer place is here with yer family and yer craft. Everythin' else is nought but a bother. Let the lords talk their own ears off in court—ye don't need their approval."

Hem's heart constricted at his words. She knew he was right but could not help craving acknowledgement. And she had already said yes to Bain.

"The way ye can't rein in yer tongue, I fear ye'll talk yerself into a corner. And when ye do, no soft eyes or smooth language will aid ye."

Dwalin looked genuinely worried where he sat, frowning at his thoughts as well as the pipe he was meticulously cleaning out. Hemery hooked her arm in his elbow and propped her chin on his shoulder.

"I'll do my best to keep my tongue in my mouth," she said, attempting a light tone.

"Perhaps I should come with ye," he said, as if it was not a question.

"It's just down the mountain. I'll not be far. And I have Bror and Raín. They won't leave me even when I beg them to. I'll be fine."

Dwalin just picked at his pipe.

"I promise," she said, "I will come back."
I will come back.

Hemery repeated it to herself over and over as she packed her things on the eve of her departure. Sethie had already taken care of it, but Hem was compelled to go over it again and again—a product of nerves, she mused.

She was pacing between her trunk and the wardrobe, twirling the ring on her finger absently and fretting that she would forget something important when a knock on the door interrupted her.

It was late. She only knew of one person who would dare disturb her at this time of night.

Thorin made very much the same intimidating figure in the still hallway by her door as he did ten years ago when Hem first met him, the torchlight casting black shadows across his grave visage. It seemed a lifetime had passed since. And, in a way, it had. Now, her heart beat forcefully at the sight of him for entirely different reasons.

"Follow me," he simply said, turning to move down the corridor.

Hemery gaped at the audacity.

"Apologies, Sire," she said, the words not mirroring the objection on her face. "I have things to attend to."

She did not. Unless one counted sleep which was what she should be occupying herself with rather than obsessing over packed trunks and chase after kings in the night.

He halted and focused on her through the gloom.

"If you please," he added meaningfully. "Would you grace me with your company in your remaining hours in my city since I am certain sleep eludes you as it does me this night?"

Everyone in Erebor was under the impression Hem had the king's ear when, in reality, he had hers—utterly and completely. She could not refuse him any more than she could fly. Taking in the suspended expectation on his face, she quelled a sigh, closed the door behind her, and followed him.

Despite the walking stick, his motions were more fluid now, as if it was simply an extension of him. His limp was almost gone.

"Where are we goin'?" she asked.

He did not speak right away, and when he did, he did not answer.

"You accepted Bain's offer in the end, after all the griping."

Fairly sure he did not see, Hem rolled her eyes. "He was persuasive."

Thorin grunted. He lead her down to the lower levels by narrow, winding backstairs mainly used by servants. The steep angle made for an awkward descent with Thorin's cane.

"Would you not rather use the other staircase?" she asked.

"I would . . . had it not passed the tunnel to the treasury."
Curious, Hem waited for him to explain further.

"I do not go there . . . anymore," he settled.

"The treasury?"

"Aye." His low voice reverberated against the high walls, making his words clearer but ominous. "Possessing such wealth changes a person. Knowing it's there is enough. I do not require visual evidence as well. All I need is to remember I do not own it—my people do."

Hem felt the profound truth in the statement and suspected there was more to the story. She twirled the ring on her finger as they continued their descent.

"Are you not going to voice some clever irony on my treatment of said people—how I value some of them less than horses, perhaps?" he asked dryly, referring to her own critique from their last conversation.

"Why? Would you like me to? Would it ease your conscience to have me abuse you?" she prodded. "Would angry words to your face be sufficient punishment?"

Thorin stopped and turned toward her on the step below hers. The steel of his gaze silenced her.

"Would it make you feel better?" he asked.

"Perhaps temporarily," she admitted, stubbornly keeping her chin raised. "But I believe I've said all I'm goin' to say on the matter."

"And likewise," he countered, "it might ease my conscience briefly, but the deed is done, and only amends can be made, never erasure."

He turned to continue down the stairs. Hem agreed that nothing could be made to undo what was already done, but she would have liked to hear him, at least once, acknowledge his part in her fate. She did not blame him as wholeheartedly as she once did, but his involvement was undeniable. However, she needed to keep in mind that the king was infallible.

"You never ask forgiveness, do you," she stated more than asked.

A long moment passed before he spoke again.

"When I came back to Erebor, I was not myself. Everything I had spent years trying to reach was close enough to touch—our home, my throne, the gold. And when it was threatened, I could not see clearly. I was prepared to die for it, to kill for it."

Thorin paused by a door.

"I almost slew my best friend for even suggesting my goals were not worth losing our lives for."

Hemery remembered hearing about the disputes relating to the reclaiming of Erebor.

"Dwalin?" she whispered.

"Aye," he said softly, tilting his head toward her. "Such was the fear and the sickness that gripped me. I could not distinguish friend from foe."

He exited through the door, held it open for her to pass as well, and continued down a corridor. They were close to the kitchens now, passing food cellars on both sides. Thorin entered a door on
the left which opened up to an endless hall with barrels and urns stacked on shelves as far as the eye could see. It was like a library of beverages.

Slowly, they moved down the aisle. Thorin brushed his fingertips on casks and bottles thoughtfully. Hemery stayed silent, hoping he would keep talking and give away the reason for this late night excursion. And she let her senses soak in his presence—the sound of his voice, the words he spoke, and the trust he showed by doing so.

"When we journeyed to Blackwater," he went on, "I felt an echo of the same sensation. Finally I would have the vengeance I thought I craved, only to have it disintegrate like a dream in the stage of waking. I put my people at risk with nothing to show for it. Then the orcs came. Once more, I felt that which I valued most slip away from me, and I did what I had to do in order to keep it, even if—ironically enough—it was to let it go."

Goosebumps erupted along her spine and up her scalp, almost like a response to the vibrations of his voice. Perhaps it was just the cold room. Thorin seemed to notice as well, though Hem had been sure he had hardly looked at her since the staircase. He shrugged off his coat to drape it over her shoulders from behind.

His hands lingered on the collar, as if making sure the heavy coat would not slip off as soon as he let go. His words were a low rumble in her ear.

"If I cannot forgive myself, how could I beg it of another?"

No, she considered, the king was not infallible; everything fell heavier on the king's shoulders. She turned her head toward him.

"So, all this time, you never asked Dwalin for forgiveness either?"

"No."

His hands fell away from her shoulders. The coat was warm and overwhelmed her by offering Thorin's particular, earthy smell on every inhalation. It was calming and exciting all at once, but it still faded as soon as he withdrew.

She seldom saw him without a coat as an outer layer. Not even a brigandine shielded the outlines of his chest in the soft light, and she could reach out and touch him if she wanted to. She would feel the warmth of his skin through the linen shirt. It would be so easy. But she could not, so she did not.

"But you seemed almost friendly when I saw you two together on the journey home," she asked, reminding herself of the topic at hand.

"Almost," he grunted, pulling a bottle off a shelf and scrutinizing it. "There is still plenty to be resolved. Sometimes I wonder if it would not be easier to simply work forward without dredging up the past, but then I remember all that was said and the fire in my gut and I—" Thorin shook his head. "I cannot."

"Yet you want me to do the same thing? Move forward without resolvin' the past."

"That is different," he said quickly.

"How?"
"Because it regards you . . . and I. We are different. We are beyond common conventions and affectations. I know I speak harshly sometimes, but you see the reasoning at the core."

Hem blushed at the intimate implication she knew he did not intend. "I hope so, or I would never have put up with your manners," she muttered.

"And despite your insolence," he said pointedly, "I see your reasoning as well." He held her gaze a moment. "Most of the time," he added, smirking.

She crossed her arms but said nothing.

They went back the way they came only to enter another door. It was the grand dining hall they sat in during the farewell dinner before Blackwater. It was empty, and the table was bare of crockery but for the far end where two seats were set. However, the lamps hanging from the ceiling and along the walls were lit as if prepared for a ceremonial dinner, though no one but the two of them was present.

Their steps echoed in the hall as they approached the table.

"What's this?" Hem asked, though there was nothing wrong with her sight. The table was clearly set with food. Meat, cheese, bread, eggs, nuts, fruit, and, to her delight, butter.

"If one cannot sleep, one can always eat," Thorin replied. "And I wish to speak to you. I would have your jaws busy with nourishment rather than interrupting me while I do so."

"Indeed," she said unimpressed. She glared at him but sat down nonetheless, draping the coat behind her on her seat as elegantly as she was able. It was very big and heavy, touching the floor when she shrugged it off her shoulders, but it could not be helped.

He dusted off the bottle he had brought and poured her a goblet of wine. It tasted of the earth in which it had been stored as much as the fruit outside the mountain from which it was fermented.

Despite Thorin's expressed wish to talk, they ate in silence a long while. He sat at the head of the table and Hemery on his right. Once she realised how hungry she was and had devoured her first piece of bread, he subtly pushed the plate of cheese in her direction and then the meat and so forth. She vaguely reflected that everything on the table was her favourite food before he finally spoke.

"I have asked you here tonight because you are my friend, Hemery Skinner," Thorin began.

Hem froze. A voice much like Thorin's called from a bloody memory.

My beloved friend.

"And I have done you a great wrong," he continued, oblivious to her moment of confusion. "For years—a time much longer by your measure than mine—you have supported me and my family. Though not always heeding my command, you have consistently acted in the interest of the kingdom, even risking your life in the process. And in return, all you wanted was freedom."

For some reason, Hem felt her chest expand. When Thorin had addressed her actions in the past, it was often to admonish her. She greatly desired his honesty, but she was still not accustomed to the way his statements sometimes cut into the truth of things in the most unexpected ways.

"I can provide that freedom, if you let me," he said.

Hem looked at him sharply. What was this—new rules and conditions?
"I can make sure you never have to leave Erebor against your will," he said, "that you may remain
with your family and continue your work as you please, and that your honour never will be
questioned again."

She almost laughed. Something always seemed to appear to disturb her peace—often he himself
was the source of the disturbance. What made him think it was possible to accomplish all this? But
she had promised to listen, so she remained silent as he continued.

"For our mutual peace of mind, for your safety, and to pledge my loyalty to you as you have to me,
I would like you to consider marrying me."

Hemery's heart stopped. Thorin spoke again before she could gather breath to vocalise any sort of
reaction.

"I am familiar with your perspective on marital union, but I assure you, it would be strictly
formality. You would not be . . . chained as you put it. You would still work and attend court as
you wish, have free range over your time and space. As my consort, you would also have a
permanent seat on the council. In essence, as my wife, you would enjoy more freedom than any
other on the mountain."

Fire and ice washed over her in waves. She tried to keep her breathing under control while her heart
raced in its own pace after the initial paralysis.

"Most importantly," he concluded, "you could stay."

He did this for her, Hem realised with tears burning in her eyes. Thorin was willing to include her
forever in his immediate life so she would not have to bear the consequences of his rash decisions
or suffer under the yoke of other people's expectations.

She had merely wanted an apology. As amends went, this was a grand gesture. But it was purely
done out of honour and respect, not due to any romantic notion. Then again, she had never viewed
marriage as romantic.

"Are you sure?" she finally managed to ask when she found her voice.

Thorin's serious countenance softened.

"I never contemplated taking a wife, though my advisors encouraged it. Always too busy running a
mountain. And I already have an heir in Fíli, so there was no rush." A small smile played on his
lips. "I can think of worse reasons to marry than of mutual respect and gratitude."

So he really expected nothing to change between them if she said yes? No conjugal duties, no
domination of either time or attention? She would have the privileges of the king's consort without
any of the drawbacks.

"But—" she began. "You'd give up your last freedom to repay a moral debt to me?"

She would have laughed at the irony had the conversation not been so absurd. But Thorin was
sincere, even if slightly amused by her feeble objections.

"All I could ever ask for is loyalty, honour, and a willing heart. And you have proved yourself
plenty."

Hem drained her goblet. Her skin was on fire from head to foot, from embarrassment to joy to
implied intimacies that would never be realised. But the consequences of this particular marriage
were overshadowed momentarily by the fact that he had actually asked her. Whenever he said the word, Hem's blush returned with a vengeance. She wondered how much the wine affected her body and mind. Enough to influence her skin colour, but not enough to influence her decisions, surely.

"So the wine and the food was all for this purpose?" she asked shrewdly.

Thorin sighed, a long suffering sound. "I was not about to have this discussion in your chambers with you in nothing but your shift as our previous meetings. It would have been most unfair. And no sound decisions were ever made on an empty stomach. The wine is simply to subdue the worst of the conventions that are ingrained in your mind. You have had but one drink. Regardless, you need not answer immediately if you feel the circumstances may be an issue."

He drummed his fingers on the table and looked away, as if indifferent. But Hem knew he had chosen to see her at this late hour because she was leaving tomorrow. He claimed the answer could wait, but it could not—not really.

There was no question as to what she wanted to do, but neither did she want to go back on her promise to Bain. It killed her a little, but she had to refuse Thorin.

"I already gave my word to Bain that I would aid him," she said.

Thorin turned his guarded eyes on her.

"That's not what I asked you," he reminded, "and would be of no concern should you agree to marry me."

"My word will not be worth less than yours, Sire," she emphasised, cheeks burning. "I will go tomorrow. The deal only applies to one specific task, and when it is done, I am able to terminate our contract."

"How long?"

She frowned. What did it matter? "I—I don't know."

"A week?"

Hem's eyebrows rose. She very much doubted that unravelling the heart of illegal trade in Lake Town would take less than seven days.

"Two?"

Two weeks? Was he making fun of her? She let out an incredulous laugh. "I don't know," she breathed out, shaking her head.

"Right. A month, then," he settled, as if she had said as much. "Surely one month is enough to make preparations."

She stared. "So . . . even if I go, you're still offerin' . . . ?"

"This proposal is not preconditioned on your rejection of Bain's offer. If we are married—"

Hem blushed again.

"—you would not need to leave Erebor, but you are still allowed to, naturally. Your work would be unaffected, but your safety would be guaranteed. That is all that matters."
With tingling skin, she regarded Thorin in the clear light of the dining hall. She would never doubt him, but she was still astounded to realise he was sincere in his offer of marriage.

A less selfish woman might have said no. A woman who believed love held the key position in marriage might have said no. A woman who had not come to desire her king with all his moods and rough manners might have said no. She had almost said no on principle because no king would ever marry a leather smith—which was what she remained underneath all her fancy words. But she was not principled or selfless when it came to Thorin, so she did not.

"Aye," she said softly. "I'll marry you."

Thorin showed no alteration in his posture, just let out a breath as if satisfied the matter was finally settled. "Very good," he said with a curt nod, as if they had indeed agreed on a business transaction.

Hemery did not know what to say after that, too occupied trying to breathe and not cry. Why were her eyes tearing up? She was not sad, only shocked.

After a moment of silence, Thorin spoke again, thankfully.

"You should rest. I will see you back to your chambers," he said politely.

When they parted late that night, Hemery and Thorin shook hands. And if Hem, at the prospect of a marriage based purely on pragmatic reasons, suddenly found the brief touch more painful than no physical contact at all, she would not admit it.
Bror, Rain, and Vannur accompanied Hemery down to the entry hall on the morning of her departure. A carriage would take them and any necessary belongings down to Esgaroth for the duration of their stay—or rather, Hem's stay. She had told them that she technically was not living in Erebor for the foreseeable future and that they were under no obligation to follow her anywhere anymore, but it had made no difference to them.

Bror had not dignified her statement with any sort of reply, while Rain, awkwardly and reluctantly, explained that she was still technically a member of the royal family and therefore always under their protection. Vannur agreed, reminding Hem that her orders were unchanged since Blackwater. She would follow Hemery until Thorin stated otherwise. They shrugged at the prospect of a few months on the lake, clearly seeing it as a small amount of time to spend at the foot of the mountain rather than inside it. Secretly pleased at their readiness to follow her, Hemery set out.

"Perchance your presence in Lake Town will not be as discreet as we hoped, Miss," Vannur said as soon as they left the anteroom and stepped into the early morning light.

"What?" Hemery questioned stupidly, looking around.

A driver and his carriage waited there to take them downhill, as arranged, curiously eyeing two dozen soldiers lined up next to him decked in the Durin crest and royal colours.

"What's this?"

The dwarf closest to Hem came forward, put his fist over his heart, and bowed his head.

"Ulvar son of Ulver, captain of The Iron Wolves, at your service."

As he straightened, he produced a scroll to Hemery. Wary, she accepted it. The text was in Khuzdul, but she recognised it as a formal message when scanning the contents.

"On this the fifteenth day of May . . . two and twenty soldiers . . . honour guard . . . appointed henceforth . . . by order of King Thorin."

It was signed and stamped with the king's seal—the oak crest from the ring which Thorin carried on his right index finger at all times. Hem gaped, looking from the parchment to the long line of soldiers, to the captain, and lastly to Vannur, Raín, and Bror. She rolled up the scroll so quickly she almost crumpled it in her tense fingers.

So Thorin thought she needed more protection. Suddenly, as if by magic, she was more valuable than she had been a day ago. Hem seethed. Indeed, it seemed married women—or pledged women, as the case may be—were more important than those that had not been claimed by a man.

"This—" she managed, pressing the parchment to Ulvar's chest. "This is bollocks."

The good captain allowed himself a confused frown underneath the professional sternness, but he relieved her of the paper, nonetheless.

"You're not comin' with us," Hem said, moving to the carriage, but the captain followed.

"Our directives are clear, M'lady."
"And so are mine. My mission in Lake Town will be compromised if I move about with thirty dwarves on my heel like . . . " she trailed off, motioning vaguely to the uniformed row of heavily armed dwarves, " . . . dour handmaidens."

The captain began turning an alarming shade of red beneath his helmet, but before he could voice his reaction to her colourful statement, Vannur and Raín ushered Hem away a few paces.

"I suggest caution, Miss Hemery," Raín said. "This squadron is part of The Red Guard. Highly trained, most prestigious."

"The Red Guard?" Hem echoed. "Never heard of them."

"I served with them until the fall of Erebor," Vannur said. "You could have no better protection."

"They're too many. I'm supposed to be obscure."

Raín lowered her voice further, as if discussing something scandalous. "If you reject them, they'd be disgraced. That is, if you can reject them—these are the king's orders."

Vannur added, "It would not be in your interest to alienate the king's best and most trusted force before you even wed him."

Hem blanched. "How do you—" she stuttered, looking between them. How did Vannur know about that? Hem had only agreed to Thorin's proposal a few hours ago. A proposal that she, until this moment, had almost thought was a dream.

"Why would you say that?"

Raín blushed, and Vannur smirked, but Bror just gave her a pointed look over the others' shoulders—Who are you kidding?—not really taking part in the conversation.

"Even if we hadn't shadowed you day and night," Vannur explained, "it's our job to know."

"Everythin'?" Hem questioned.

"Everything, Miss," Vannur confirmed with a sage nod. Then she glanced at the soldiers. "Just take them." She shrugged. "You're not supposed to expose yourself that much anyway. You'll save yourself trouble and relieve the king if you just oblige."

Hem's jaws clenched and her nostrils flared in suppressed irritation.

"Oh, he's stressed is he? People makin' his life difficult? I can bloody well relate to his situation. And I don't want to bloody oblige."

Raín's eyes grew wide, and Bror's rolled in something like exasperation, but Vannur levelled Hem with a serious gaze.

Hemery sighed in defeat and continued soberly. "But . . . because you advise me to, I'll oblige."

Vannur nodded once more, and Rain breathed out.

Hemery turned to Captain Ulvar.

"At least change clothes into somethin' a little more . . . pedestrian," she told him. "We don't want to announce ourselves. 'Here goes strays from the king's herd—the loyal, the paid, and the coerced.'"
Dear Hanah,

I must speak to you with what means I have at hand. Raín, Vannur, and Bror are dear company, and I trust them implicitly, but they are not you. They deal with enough of my frustration and moods; they don't need to hear my ramblings as well.

I have only been here three days, but I already fear I am out of my depth. Please, do not roll your eyes at me. I know what I said. Just let me relate my situation.

I am staying at The Galley for the duration of my stay. It is a bit farther from the courthouse than Bain would like, but I prefer the familiarity of The Galley to the grandeur of The Crown or the awkwardness of Bain's guest rooms.

Lord Bain is very accommodating. He provides me with all the information and details I ask for. I have taken upon myself to look into all his financial records and that of his employees. What they earn, what they spend, how big their families are, how much their households cost, and whatever else I can find. I hope to find someone who may benefit from Bain's misfortune, thus locating the so-called rat on his ship. But so far, nothing. The state of his ledgers and his accountants' penmanship are appalling. I do not know how long it will take to conclude my work here.

I have, however, acquired a rat of my own . . .

"That's it," Hemery declared when she had been pouring over papers and receipts for two days and even the smallest inclination of her head caused a stab in her neck due to the static work. "I'm goin' out."

She had been given an isolated room on the ground floor of Bain's courthouse. Bror and Vannur fell into step with Hem as she exited. For every corridor they passed and every door they walked through, more guards joined them. The Iron Wolves. At least four of them followed her at all times, on a rotating schedule much like her own guards, but it was still too many, she thought.

Hem almost snorted at the absurdity. They were warriors prepared for battle, overqualified for tending her. Most of the time, she pulled up her hood to hide her face when they moved in the streets to avoid inquisitive eyes. There were plenty of those in Esgaroth.

Hem looked over her shoulder at her followers, gritting her teeth to stop herself from shouting at them to give her space to breathe. It was not their fault they got on her nerves; they were just following orders. Shadows who she knew where paid to protect her were preferable to many others in a city with too much people, crowded streets, and little to no personal space.

As she turned back, focusing on the street in front of her, she bumped into someone. A sharp shoulder knocked hers, and the person, small and unassuming, put out their hands to break their fall.

They never fell, though. Two of Ulvar's soldiers pounced like the wolves they supposedly were named after, gripping the small shoulders and held them a bit too high off the ground for the person to stand properly, clearly ready to abuse the poor soul for its carelessness.

It was a girl, Hem saw now. One of the soldiers even had the handle of a dagger pressed under her
"Stand down, you beasts!" Hem barked at them in rage. "It's just a . . ." Her words failed her.

As soon as she looked upon the lass at the mercy of the dwarven soldiers, dressed in simple and cheap brown leather and undyed linen, Hem realised she was a dwarf. Thin and young, most likely, but that was not the most striking observation.

A tremor gripped Hem—a vibration emanating like steam from the dwarf girl. And, in an instant, she knew that the collision had been designed. She had the strangest urge to search the girl's clothes and pockets like a bloodhound, fearing she would find weapons or . . . she did not know what, but something dangerous. But she refrained with great self-restraint.

"Apologies, m'lady," the girl squeaked pathetically, miserable and fearful of the armed dwarves clutching her neck. "'Twas but an accident."

"That's quite alright," Hem replied calmly. She raised her palm as a sign to the soldiers. "Put her down."

Remarkably, the wolves obeyed. Standing on her own now, the girl pulled her clothes tighter, as if folding in on herself, turning even smaller. But even something as small as a flea could carry the deadliest of diseases.

"Just empty your pockets for me, please," Hem said, "and you can go."

"M'lady?" Her big, hazel eyes went shiny.

"Beautiful day for a pickpocket. Goin' on dusk now—the fadin' light makin' it difficult to see in the crowded streets, but not as risky as night-time thievery. I've seen my share of urchins in Tirith to know the difference between beggars and thieves."

This was a lie. Hem had seen very little street crime during her studying years due to Dwalin's vigilant guardianship. But it was a reasonable statement to use in order to find out if Hem's fears were valid.

"I've done nothing, m'lady," the girl cried, shaking her head emphatically. "Please."

The girl's tears awakened a bitter memory in Hemery—the same words uttered by another young woman. She ignored it.

"And you may prove it. Now, turn out your pockets." Her voice remained collected and cool, but she anxiously twirled the ring on her middle finger. If Hem felt bad for needlessly strong-arming and scaring the young girl, playing up the authoritative role of noble lady with the help of her nice dress and six Ereboran soldiers at her back, no one would know.

The girl stared at her a moment, then darted quick as an ermine to the left, intending to slip back into the crowd and disappear. But the wolves were quicker. Not two steps later, she was back in their claws, struggling to escape but to no avail.

Vannur came forward to search the girl's clothes. Soon, she found a familiar leather purse with the initials HS which she handed back to Hemery. Immediately, the creeping tremors that had tugged at her skin lessened, and with it, the paralysing fear ebbed away.

"There we are," Hem settled, put her purse back into her own pocket, and closed it securely.
Hem regarded the dwarf girl. Gone was the timid lass, and in her stead, a confident young woman stared back in defiance, her stubborn chin held high without being forced this time.

"Get on with it. Take me to the gaoler, if you mean to," the young woman spat.

Hem shrugged, carefree now that the danger had been destroyed as easily as a smoke screen.

"Don't know." She had no qualms about stressing the girl now that Hem knew she was in fact guilty of something.

She probably had no work if she needed to steal. Perhaps a third party took whatever she succeeded in stealing at the end of the day as so many other poor sods in the city. Or so Hemery had heard.

"Would you like to make some honest coin?" she asked.

The girl stilled in the soldiers grasp, frowning. "What are you on about?"

"I was on my way to The Galley to get some food," Hem improvised, though she found she was quite hungry now that she thought about it. "I'll give you a piece of silver, and you'll go and bring me back two of their ham and mustard sandwiches. On your return, you get two more pieces to keep."

"Or I'll just take your silver and not return," the girl countered.

"Aye, you could. But you'd be left with a supper's worth of money and nothin' left to invest for your next meal." Hem watched, curious to see if the girl would take the bait.

"How do I know you'll pay the rest?" Still suspicious.

"You don't. Just like I don't know whether you'll come back at all."

The girl thought a moment. Then she tore her arm out of the soldier's grip, but she did not try to scarper, only shot the armoured dwarves an ugly look as she straightened her shirt.

Regaining her dignity and keeping her head high, she met Hem's eye with her own haughty gaze, like forced nonchalance.

"Very well," she said.

"Good," Hem confirmed, held out her hand with a coin which the girl received in her palm. Her fingers locked around it, and her hand retracted to her chest, as if afraid someone would try to take it back as soon as it was given. She looked around her at the guards and lastly back at Hem before taking off in swift stride down the street.

She headed in the correct direction at least, Hem mused, soon losing track of the dwarf girl in the stream of people.

Hem took a short walk to stretch her legs around the square and then returned to her study. The guards followed her like a snake's tail, but she tried to ignore them, only focusing on relieving her sore back.

A few minutes after she had delved back into her work, Vannur knocked on the door.

"The thief is back," she said, smirked, and placed two paper-wrapped packages on the table.

"Hm," Hem uttered in surprise, her eyebrows hiking. She reached into her pocket and produced
two more coins. "Tell her she may keep one of the sandwiches as well."

Vannur took the money and one of the packages and did not disturb Hem again until she was finished for the night. Hemery guessed the girl had accepted the food as well as the coin.

When Hemery left The Galley the next morning with her guards in tow, she was in low spirits. She was getting tired of paper trails leading nowhere, and her mood reflected it.

After a while, Hem noticed that Bror and Vannur kept close to her sides, throwing alert glances around. Though the behaviour was not strange in itself, she imagined their posture tenser than usual.

Vannur leaned in to whisper, "You have a tail, Miss."

Hem turned her head to her, alarmed, but the guards' motions remained unaltered, and their procession continued. She followed Vannur's line of sight and spotted the dwarf girl across the canal, watching her.

Apprehensive, Hem continued down the street as usual, seeing out of the corner of her eye how the girl followed. She was good. If Hemery did not know what she looked like, she would not have known the girl was shadowing them.

When they were almost at the courthouse, she was suddenly out of sight. Hemery paused a moment on the stone steps, peering into the crowded street, but she saw nothing. Something niggled at the back of her mind. Perhaps she had been too hasty in letting her go yesterday. Perhaps she should have taken her to the gaoler. She was a thief, after all. But what was done was done, and the girl was nowhere to be seen.

Throughout the day, the dwarrow thief was never far from Hemery's mind which was getting darker and darker. The work subverted what had started as a positive outlook, proving the research of financials and council meeting protocols to be an exercise in futility.

There was no beginning and no end to the troubles she read in the documentation, and everything was connected to something. The welfare, the maintenance, and the security of the city all suffered from lack of funds—funds that lessened every quarter year at the time of taxation despite the increased number of citizens. The city was bleeding, and no one knew where it was punctured.

Bain's bookkeepers, clerks, guards, and law men were all paid below average—at least by her, and Erebor's, standards—so anyone could be seen as willing to look for extra coin elsewhere and were therefore suspects in whatever plot of larceny Bain was subjected to.

The third day felt as wasteful as the first two. To make things worse, Hem had more reason—and desire—than ever to return to Erebor, but she forced herself to not think about Thorin.

When she left the courthouse that night, she was startled by a voice to the side of the empty street.

"I know who you are."

Hemery swivelled toward the speaker. The guards seemed as taken by surprise as she when the dwarf girl appeared by a wooden pillar where previously there had been no one. They closed around Hem in a small half-circle.
Hem regained her calm, answering as indifferently as possible, "Is that so?" As if she was not bothered in the slightest that such a mercenary creature was interested in her origin and purpose.

"You're the young Skinner woman, King Thorin's jester, and aunt of the bastard heir." Her tone was light.

Vannur took a step toward the girl, exposing an inch of her sword from its scabbard as a clear warning. Bror took his axe in hand, resting it against his shoulder, as if not viewing the girl as a serious threat but still ready.

"Watch your tongue, wench," Vannur growled.

"But on the one hand," the girl went on, undeterred, "jesters don't get escorts. On the other hand, members of the royal family don't leave the golden city. So what are you doing here?"

She had the audacity to come closer, as if merely curious and not at all afraid of the weapons prepared to spill her blood. Hem kept her feet glued to the ground despite her trepidation.

"I don't answer to nameless wretches in the street, certainly not in these streets," Hem replied, reluctant to give anything away. She already knew too much.

"I'm Lida," the young dwarf said.

Hemery expected her to follow up with more. All dwarves were proud of their heritage, but maybe this one was not.

"Homeless and kinless?" Hem taunted, harsher than intended.

"Just Lida," she maintained.

"Lida of nowhere and no mother but with skills of a magpie," Hem stated in place of title. "My business here is none of yours, I'm afraid."

"Business in the courthouse? Someone there ought to know, I guess." Lida tilted her head as if she contemplated going there and make inquiries herself.

"Forgive my presumptuousness, but you don't look like the kind of person who has friends at the courthouse."

She shrugged. "For the right price, one can have all the friends in the world."

That caught Hem's attention.

"What do you mean?"

Lida smiled innocently. "Nothing. We're just getting to know each other."

Hem pierced her with a scrutinising look, trying to decide if she was telling the truth. Lida's expression did not waver.

Why was she wasting Hemery's time? Did she know something about Hemery's assignment? Was she fishing for more money? As tired as she was, Hem would pay her five silver coins just to make her go away. But that would be a mistake; she would find five more beggars outside her door in the morning.

Finally, she decided to ignore Lida. Hem began walking once more, but the dwarf would not be
dismissed so easily.

"How are you enjoying the lake? Finding what you're looking for?" Lida asked, keeping up with the procession.

Hem refused to take the bait, only glancing at Lida from the corner of her eye.

"Sure, you have plenty of guards," Lida went on. "But if you ever need anything…"

"What would I need?" Hem's lip curved in rising annoyance.

"Anything—not just morsels—anything at all. I can get it for you."

Hemery had underestimated the dwarf girl. She was quite the merchant. Hem glanced at her again, unimpressed with her questionable offer.

"Run along home. Looks like rain tonight," was all she replied.

Lida was not to be discouraged. "You know where to find me."

"In my pocket?" Hem sneered.

Judging by the way she snickered, Lida was not offended by the comment before she veered into a side street and disappeared.

A letter waited for Hemery as she arrived at The Galley.

Sister,

*Thorin came to see me. You and I need to speak.*

*H*
Damn.

The king did not waste time. Hem would have to visit Erebor earlier than she planned in order to speak to Hanah.

She wondered what exactly Thorin had told her sister. Worst case, Hanah might think this was another underhanded deal that Hem had been forced into. If so, she would not be pleased, might even have shared a piece of her mind with the dwarf king. Hanah was usually more decorous and cool tempered than Hem, but in light of recent events, she was not so sure. She hoped Thorin remembered her own reservations about marriage when speaking to Hanah about it.

They were both adults, Hem reasoned. Surely, they could have a respectful conversation.

She crumpled the paper and threw it into the fire. Who was she kidding? Hem rubbed her eyes, weary.

Thorin, what did you do?

Hemery dreaded her meeting with Hanah. She feared what her sister might think and what she might say. Hanah clearly already knew of her engagement to Thorin, so that spared Hem the awkward revelation but not the confrontation which Hanah had days to fret, mull, and seethe over.

Hemery was not ashamed of her choice of husband. That kind of embarrassment was not why she looked forward to speaking with Hanah with the same anticipation as when pulling a rotten tooth. She feared Hanah would not approve of the conscious choice to reject the independence her sister had fought so hard for, to choose security over freedom and judicial bonds over bonds of love.

Was the union to any other than Thorin, Hem would heartily declare it foolish to enter into with expectations of peace and prosperity without spoken vows of sincere affection. But it was not, so she did not.

How could she explain to Hanah that she preferred the dwarf king to all other potential partners and jumped like a dog eager for her master's closeness at the chance to possess him as he already possessed her—love be damned?

So, as Hemery went to visit home after six days in Esgaroth, she ignored her sister's ominous not-quite-request and went to Dwalin's house first.

"Ye look greener than a woodland faery," Dwalin said as soon as she entered his yard in the afternoon. Hem guessed he referred to their pale, elven neighbors. "Have ye lived with merfolk down at that lake?"

"No, you borish brute," she jabbed back. "I've just been indoors for a week."

"He feedin' ye enough, the wee lord?" He pinched her arm when she got close enough. He elbowed him and pushed past before he bruised her.

"I feed myself, thanks for askin'," she said, walking straight into his house and opened the pantry, helping herself to some dried meat.
Dwalin dwelled a moment on his stoop, glaring at the Iron Wolves left in her wake. Only Vannur followed Hem into his home but not without a disapproving look from Dwalin.

"Oh, aye," he drawled sarcastically. "Please, enjoy. Eat me out of house and home, Ladybug. Just don't expect me to feed yer friends out there."

"They're not my friends." Hem rolled her eyes and sat at his table. Vannur, however, stayed in the forge.

"Nay, one cannot befriend what eats and breathes metal. It's certainly more than the pleasure of yer company that attracts that humourless lot."

His tone was so serious that she stopped chewing to stare at him. At the piercing, knowing look, she swallowed the beef too soon, the dry chunks scratching her throat on their way down.

"It wasn't my idea," she said—childishly, perhaps. "King's orders."

Already, she hid behind words on parchment with golden seal.

"I know that. I'm not daft. The wolves don't leave their lair for nought," he pressed on.

Hem tugged free another piece of meat with her teeth. "Won't you even offer me somethin' to drink now that I've taken time out of my busy day to see you?" She attempted to deflect his inquisitiveness.

Dwalin produced jugs and bottles. Home brewed, by the look of things. The heavy clonk of ceramics on the table belied his hospitality. He knew she was stalling.

"Why would ye accept the king's absurd orders on this occasion?"

"It seemed like the appropriate thing to do," Hem replied vaguely.

He waited patiently, drinking his ale. She looked down.

"In this case, I admit that the king knows what's appropriate better than I. If he believes the situation calls for these . . . wolves, I'll concede because I find myself in unknown territory. And I'm not talkin' about Esgaroth."

Hem looked up. Dwalin said nothing, expecting her to continue. He knew something was afoot. Might as well come out with it.

"I've decided to marry," she said plainly.

His gaze became distant a moment, then his brow furrowed, troubled. He drew a long breath, very long, as if to prepare a great speech. But in the end, he let it out in a sigh and bent his head in defeat.

A lump formed in Hem's throat, and it was not the beef this time. Did the mere notion disturb him so much?

"I don't want to drift anymore," she said, trying to explain. "My work provide all the mobility and excitement I can handle. I don't want to fend for myself anymore."

At last, Dwalin looked up but only to shake his head, mournfully.

"Ye have never been alone," he protested gruffly.
"You know what I mean," she said, wanting to define the expanding feeling of helplessness and lack of control over her own fate that she experienced the older she got. "Sometimes, I have wished I could live here with you forever, but I can't. I want to stand on somethin', to settle on a solid foundation that will not be broken or bartered for other people's benefit. This is one way to do that."

"But why so soon?" he lamented.

"Because someone asked me. And I was glad when he did." Hem felt her cheeks warm a bit.

"And who is it that has turned yer head around so far that ye can't tell left from right?" he asked.

Suddenly, she realised Hanah might have been more accepting than Dwalin, and perhaps she should have visited her first, after all. Hem would have liked her support right now. Hanah did not spend three decades avoiding Thorin or stubbornly nursed a grudge against Thorin. Dwalin did.

"Does one need to be labeled unsound as soon as one marries?" Hem avoided the question, feeling her hackles rise. "Just because you've never sought marital contentment does not render the pursuit futile."

Dwalin's face darkened. "We're not talkin' about me. And ye're buildin' a weak wall with yer fancy words—there are no politicians here to persuade."

Hem looked away, folding her arms. Typical of him to draw out her thoughts like a soothsayer.

"If ye feel so defensive about it, perhaps this is not what ye—"

"It's Thorin," she said quickly, as if having it done so would soften the blow. She did not know whether it did because all she received was silence. She hardly dared look back at him, but she had to.

He looked downcast, his mouth stiff, as if the heavens had opened up for rain when he had wanted it fine. He folded his hands on the table. He shifted in his seat and cleared his throat. Then he scratched his chin beneath his beard. After a long moment, he spoke, but this voice was hoarse with suppressed emotion.

"If this is what ye want . . ." He shrugged one shoulder, still not looking at her directly. He drummed a finger on the table.

"It is," she all but whispered.

"I know how persuasive he can be. Ye know ye don't have to say yes just 'cause he's king—"

Dwalin stated more forcefully.

"I know."

He nodded in acknowledgement. "Of course, what am I thinkin'?" he said to himself. "If anyone would dare say no to the king, it'd be you. But I still think this is too hasty," he added reprovingly. "Man kind are so quick in life. Quick to love, quick to ruin."

He sighed and thought a moment.

"Thorin's honourable and good," Dwalin conceded. "His choice does him credit."

Hem smiled at his humble statement. "I hope so."

At the return of her good humour, he turned slightly and frowned in displeasure.
"I told ye yer tongue would get ye in trouble one day."

As soon as Hemery set foot in the entrance hall of Erebor that evening, a servant approached her.

"My Lady Hemery," the dwarf addressed her with a bow. "If it would please you, His Royal Highness King Thorin requests your presence as soon as you are able."

No one had ever bowed for Hem. She raised an eyebrow at Vannur by her side, meaningfully communicating the ridiculous change she had undergone in the eyes of others. First, the honour guard, now this Lady Hemery nonsense. Was this show of exaggerated respect a consequence of the Iron Wolves' imposing proximity or was it on Thorin's insistence? Vannur only stared back, as if this was completely natural.

"I sent no word as to when I'd arrive," Hem said. She had only written to Hanah saying she would visit today. "How long have you waited?"

The servant did not hesitate in his answer. "Time is of no importance when duty is performed."

Another bow with one closed fist against his heart.

Another glance at her guards. "Indeed," she drawled in reply. "I suppose I better oblige, promptly."

Hemery let Vannur knock for her when they reached the king's rooms. No call admitting entry was heard this time. Instead, Steig opened the door from within, silently allowing Hem inside before joining the guards outside. She had not seen him since that afternoon on the training grounds, and she was grateful that he seemed to pretend like it never occurred. He even called her lady. Hem just rolled her eyes.

But now she was alone in Thorin's study.

"Hello?" she called softly. There was no sound to indicate he was near or planning to be anytime soon.

The door to the inner rooms stood wide open, and Hem glanced through the passage. The room immediately adjoined to the study had one wall covered in drawers, and the space before them was occupied by square tables covered with great sheets of paper. Some maps—land, tunnels, halls, and cities. Some filled with numbers and runes. But there was no one in the room.

Another door at the end stood open to reveal a very tall room with nothing but a carpet on the floor and tapestries on the walls. One especially striking tapestry depicted the Lonely Mountain in blues and grays with the Durin's dictum in stylised Angerthas runes written in ancient Khuzdul. Something about loyalty and honour, Hem was not sure. From above shone white light through a pyramidal glass ceiling. But the room was quite deep in the mountain; where did the light come from? It must have been artificial.

Doors stood ajar on each wall. Two rooms were dark without even a fire burning; she could only imagine their size by the echo of her steps and even her very breath in the gaping void beyond each door. Through the third, Hem had to ascend a few steps before entering a spacious area with bookshelves and cupboards from floor to ceiling, chests with unknown contents, and items of foreign function and design. Some she recognised as musical instruments, some as intricately decorated and laboriously forged weapons, some aged and some brand new. But no king.

This room also had two doors. Again, one of the rooms were unlit and seemingly unused on a daily
basis, and the other was not.

Previously, she had thought Thorin's rooms resembled Fíli's, but the likeness ended with the study. The king's rooms were like none she had seen in the mountain. Not ones intended for private use, anyway.

Hem hesitated a moment. She did not want to skulk around unaccompanied through the king's chambers, but he had called for her, and Steig had let her in. Thorin had to be here somewhere, expecting her.

The next room was smaller, containing a few bookshelves, a table where tools and metal thread resided beneath a magnifying glass, and two armchairs next to a burning fireplace. A few bottles and a tea kettle sat on a sideboard amongst some open books waiting to be finished. Candlelight spread a soft light in the room from their brass holders on the walls.

Hemery could tell that Thorin spent a lot of time in here, not only from the objects clearly used regularly but also the warmth and the scent lingering in the furniture and in the air.

Behind the next door were wardrobes and dressers, and as Hem pushed open the one after that, a wave of hot air rolled over her. A wet room. The king was seated in a giant tub with water up to his chest.

Mortified with embarrassment, Hem gasped, covered her mouth, and whirled around, leaning her forehead against the doorframe.

"Apologies—a thousand apologies, Sire," Hem stammered. "I—I didn't—I should have waited—"

Thorin chuckled behind her. "Calm yourself, please," he said evenly.

"I'll return later, or you can send for me when . . . when you're finished."

"No need. You are here now."

"I shouldn't even be in here," she protested, forcing herself to not look back at him, pressing her forehead harder against the stone.

"We are about to be wed. Surely, you will see me undressed at some point. This might as well be the first." He paused. "Unless the sight bothers you so much that you must avert your eyes from my hideous form?"

He did not think she found him unappealing, did he? Then again, he could not know that the steamy air and embarrassment was not the only reason she flushed. She wanted nothing more at that moment than to take in the pattern of hair on his chest, his wide shoulders which were clearly defined as he rested his arms along the edge, and how his damp hair clung to wet skin. But if she lifted her eyes and turned back to him for any other reason than his challenge to do so, no one would know.

"No, certainly not, Sire—" She cut herself off when she got a good look at his face.

Thorin's skin was dark with bruising, and his eyebrow sported a red gash.

"Bloody Mahal," she hissed in horror. "What happened?"

Forgetting all propriety, her legs carried her over to him, kneeling by the tub. One hand steadied her on the smooth, sanded edge, and the other shot out to trace his cheek, but she stopped a hair's
breadth away, realised just in time what she had been about to do, and drew back.

"'Tis nothing. Mere scratches, over a day old." He prodded his jaw gingerly, and opened and closed it, as if testing it.

The water was milky white from the heat and oils, but as his arm moved, Hem caught a glimpse of greyish purple spots of bruising on his shoulder as well.

"Scratches? Looks more like evidence of a pub brawl," Hem said.

Beside the tub stood a small table with linen rags and ointments. She picked up one of the rags, applied a few drops, and pressed it carefully to his eyebrow. Thorin did not stop her. He did not even flinch as the salve no doubt stung the raw skin.

"Who dared hurt you like this?" Hem wondered, finding it hard to believe that Thorin would happen to be assaulted so severely before he or anyone else could stop the assailant.

"Who do you think?" Thorin answered, raising the undamaged eyebrow at her. He did not appear to have been surprised or all that bothered about his injuries or who caused them. There had been no news of an attack on the king, and he was one of the best fighters in the kingdom—even Dwalin had said so.

Hem's thoughts were drawn to the dwarf she had just visited. Her hand stilled a moment. Dwalin had not appeared very surprised when she told him her news. Did he already know? Perhaps Hanah had told him? Had he paid Thorin a visit to tell him exactly how he felt about it?

"Surely not—? Dwalin?" she asked in disbelief.

"Who else would I allow so many strikes?"

"But I saw him, just now. He didn't have a mark on him that I could see."

"As I said—I allowed it. I did the same to him once. Now, we are closer to reconciliation than we have been in decades, which still is not saying much, mind you." He seemed quite pleased by this thought.

Hem continued to dab his face softly.

"You told him about us? Our agreement?"

Thorin huffed a half laugh. "Last time we had an honest conversation in private, it was about my sister. She was much older than you are now, and he had not even asked Dís for her hand at the time. Some might say I deserved this, for hypocrisy if nothing else. How fate will be laughing at me before this merry dance is over."

Hem pressed her lips together in exasperation. Two old dwarves squabbling like children over their pride and honour rather than that of the people they are supposedly fighting about. She traced the contour of his strong eyebrow, wiping away crusted blood.

"You've barely spoken in thirty years," Hem reminded him. "I'd thank you to not use me as an excuse to pummel each other."

"After thirty years of agitation, we do not need an excuse." He winced as he rolled his bad shoulder and then sighed. "Do you mind?"
Hem quickly drew back her hand holding the rag, fearing she upset him by pressing his tender skin. But he merely motioned to his hurt shoulder. She grew self-conscious once more.

"Would it not be proper for a healer to do this?" she asked.

"I would rather not. I have had more healers around me than I can stand, lately. Besides, it is nothing that warrants surgery. You are faring well thus far."

She hesitated.

"Unless it bothers you?" he asked, searching her face with that steely gaze.

Of course, it bothered her. She should not be in the presence of an essentially naked king, no matter how much she may have wanted to.

She did not reply, but she dipped her fingers in the salve and began coating his shoulder with it.

"Why did you tell him, then, if you knew he'd do this?" Hem asked.

"I knew it would get worse the longer I waited to go see him."

She was distracted from the warm, tough muscles beneath her fingers.

"You went to see him?"

"Aye."

"Your Highness—the king who waits on no one?" she questioned mockingly.

"It was the only thing to do," he replied pragmatically. "If you had already told him of our engagement—"

Hem still felt heat creep up her cheeks hearing him speak of it.

"—the initial inflammation might have cooled, and if you had not, he would appreciate forthrightness on my part."

"Why would you care about obtainin' his aproval? He's not my father. And even if he was, I'd not let him dictate my decisions."

"You say that because you have no father but Dwalin. A daughter not born but chosen. Apart from your sister, Dwalin is the most influential person in your vicinity. If he had his way—and had not my sister been the most influential in his life—he would have challenged me to a duel or some such nonsense on the eve of our departure to Blackwater. Do you sincerely believe you would ignore him if he set his mind to dissuade you from marrying me?"

He was right, Hem thought, but she did not reply. She did not like the idea of Dwalin and Thorin fighting over anything to do with her.

"Well, judging by your bruisin', he doesn't seem to have appreciated your respectful gesture."

"He called me some colourful names that do not merit repetition in a lady's company—or anyone else's, for that matter. Then we fought, and then we drank. I would say he took it fairly well."

He smiled at her, satisfied with his day's work. It did sound like a regular night out for a pair of dwarf comrades. Hem could not help the tug at the corner of her mouth.
She was running out of bruises to cover with ointment, but she did not want to remove her hands from him. Slowly, she expanded the area of focus, rubbing his upper back lightly. Thorin did not seem to mind. In fact, he covered her hand with his, pressing down to encourage and increase her force. Content, he let go, letting her shift behind him and place both hands on him, massaging his shoulders and neck. Her face flamed hotter than ever when she thought how easy it would be to lean down and brush her lips over his skin.

This was so beyond inappropriate, but Hem did not care. She would not tell anyone, and neither would he. She was rewarded with a hoarse sound of pained pleasure from deep in his chest that made the hairs on her arms stand up.

"I still think it was unwise, especially so soon after your injuries," she said, trying to ignore the sensations produced by the intimate contact. How the soft skin gave way to her rolling fingertips but the mass underneath was knotted in tight muscles, slowly heating and uncoiling into healthy, living flesh and blood rather than the stone it first felt like.

Thorin dismissed her words. "A stiff leg is not enough to cripple me. I have long since recovered."

It was true that dwarves were tough, but she doubted he was fully healed.

"If you say so, Sire."

Again, he covered her hand with his, stilling her movements. But this time, he held it fast where he reached for her across his shoulder. Silently, Hem watched his profile as he inclined his head toward her.

"Come here," he said, pulling gently on her hand, compelling her to sit next to the tub facing him once more. "I told you, there is no need for titles between us. Certainly not here."

She knew that standing on ceremony bored him, but it was such a habit by now that she did not know if she could stop even when he asked her to. Even when he asked with that insistent gaze.

The warmth of the room and his fingers around hers kept her flush fresh.

"Am I making you ill at ease?" he asked, serious, when she did not speak.

Thorin did undoubtedly push their boundaries every time they spoke, but she did not dislike it. Perhaps she would push back a bit.

"No," she answered truthfully. "Are you tryin' to? I have seen naked men before, you know."

"Is that so?" He spoke in a lower voice, in warning or displeasure? "Perhaps I am not the first to seek your company. Tell me, am I simply the last in a long line of suitors?"

She took her hand back.

Apprehensive, Hem wondered if Thorin would change his mind if she said yes. His words were light, but his eyes were dark. Was he fishing for information or merely jesting on her expense? In any case, she would not condone this silly talk.

"We both know there is no such trail of discarded bodies in my wake." She looked down, busying herself with wiping the salve from her hands. "But livin' in a large city, be it Erebor or Tirith, is educational when it comes to the anatomy of men. They are especially uninhibited when it comes to dress, whether its droves of drunks goin' swimmin' on Midsummer nights or lads playin' pranks on each other at school. One is bound to catch a glimpse at some point," she said as casually as
possible.

"And among the glimpses, none inspired a second look?"

Hem curved her upper lip, annoyed but still avoiding his gaze.

"I don't ask you about past . . . dalliances. Why the sudden interest in mine?" she challenged.

"Because I wish to establish trust between us."

Her eyes flew back to his. "I do trust you—"

"Aye, you are my confidant, and I wish you to remain thus, not allowing intimate aspects of our union to intimidate or repel you."

Hemery's mouth went dry.

"We will share chambers once we are wed," Thorin continued. He grazed her chin with his knuckle. "They will be our chambers, not just mine which you are invited into. You may keep your current rooms, naturally, but you will reside with me. In here," he said, motioning around him, "there will be no titles, no censure, no embarrassment."

It struck her then that this would be one of the rooms they would share. This floor, that basin, those towels—all that she saw. The realisation fell like a blanket of snow on her mind, casting everything into sharp contrast, black and white.

They would marry. Truly.

When anticipating the rest of her days with Thorin, she found little restraint remained in terms of what she could or could not divulge. No more censure. Her history would be their history.

Hem rose to pull a nearby chair to her place by the tub, so she could sit comfortably for this conversation.

"There was someone," she began. "In Tirith. Someone I met durin' my studies."

Hem remembered what headaches she caused Dwalin by stealing away at odd hours and pretending to be studying more than she was. The young man had been new and exciting, and he had discovered her, so to speak. She thought he saw her and listened to her, but she had probably only spoken to herself. In hindsight, she could not remember a single clever or funny thing he had said to her. However, she remembered Dwalin's words from this afternoon.

"It was my first year in the city. Eager to live, eager to love. It wasn't love, of course—I barely knew him." She brushed away some dust from her skirt. "After a while, he lost interest. And that was it."

She was pretty sure Dwalin knew what had transpired between her and the young man because, when it was over, he began making arrangements for Kíli and Bofur's visit. He probably thought she needed a distraction. She became even more focused on her studies after that, less impulsive and less inclined to make new friends—not that she had much time for friends to begin with—which Dwalin most likely took as a sign that she needed no judgement or reproach regarding her inappropriate behaviour. He had never mentioned the lad's name again.

She inhaled a strengthening breath and let it out, as if exhaling the memory as well as the air, and looked at Thorin.
"So I can assure you, Thorin," she said, deliberately using only his name," I'm certainly not afraid
of the male body, especially not yours. I've dragged it through mud, wrapped it's bleedin' cuts, and
now it is presented before me without armour and chainmail. I'm sure I can get used to sleepin'
next to it. And I take it that since you welcome me into your chambers when you're exposed and
vulnerable like this, you have no issues with mine either."

He smiled, his eyes glinting. "I gave the order to summon you hours ago," he explained with a
shrug. "I had no idea when you would be coming to see me."

Of course, Hem thought, he had not engineered this meeting. That would be ridiculous. Though
some part of her kind of wished he had.

Thorin added, "But it is true, there is no one I would rather share my bed with."
Hemery had learnt after years of being caught off guard and having her sensibilities shaken that benevolent indifference was the best defence for battered entrails—and hers were currently victims of assault from both butterflies and wasps.

"Good," Hemery said, without really knowing if that was an appropriate reply to what Thorin had just said. "That's good. Or our bed, as it were."

"Correct." Thorin allowed a smile to tug at his mouth as he nodded. "If there is anything you would like to ask me before the ceremony, feel free to voice it at any time."

Would Hemery like to know about Thorin's past? His romantic past? Who, when, how many, and what kind? He was so much older than her; the possibilities were endless. Suddenly, visions flashed before her eyes of beautiful elven, dwarven, and mankind women in varying degrees of undress before the king. He despised elves and distrusted men, Hem knew well, but what male could resist soft eyes and warm flesh when wrapped in tempting words and laid on a generous bed? And who could resist a rich king when the opportunity arose?

It would take a better woman than Hemery Skinner—that was for sure.

Hem hummed roughly to erase the images, but managed to disguise it as a clearing of her throat.

"Hmm, erhm—er, no, no," she stuttered. "That won't be necessary. I don't need to know anythin' about that part of your life."

Then she remembered Graham and how horrible he had acted after his and Hanah's engagement. She had not told Hanah anything about what he had said in the ruins of Blackwater, but it had been a harsh reminder for Hem of how selfish and narrow minded he was. Just because lovers became past lovers did not mean they stayed in the past.

"Unless you have history with someone I know," Hem added fearfully.

How strange it would feel to live or work near someone who Thorin had been intimate with. No, not strange—nauseating.

Thorin shook his head as if finding the notion ludicrous. "I sincerely doubt it."

Though not a straight yes or no, Hem was surprisingly comforted by his reply. "Then there's nothin' else. Not at the moment, anyway."

"Well then," Thorin settled, seemingly relieved as well. "How have you been faring at the lake?" he asked as he produced a bottle of fragrant liquid soap and began to work it into his hair, slowly and methodically.

Hem sighed with a self-deprecating smile. "Oh, I don't want to talk about that." She rubbed her forehead.

"Come now," he beckoned. "What is the matter? Are you admitting defeat already?"

She gave him a weak glare, feeling an itch in her fingers. "I'm defeated by nothin'. By my own impatience, perhaps. Nothin' more."
He waited silently.

"It'll take time, that's all," Hem said, weaving her hands together tightly to stop from fidgeting. "I'm alone after all."

"Why?"

"What do you mean why? Because Bain asked only me."

"Surely, Bain does not forbid you from delegating work, stipulating solitude and isolation?"

"No, he never made any specific demands on that account, but he was pretty clear on how sensitive the issue was. I think he'd appreciate me takin' down more people from Erebor about as much as I'd enjoy it." Then she had an idea more amusing than pragmatic. "Am I allowed to recruit Iron Wolves to the task?" she asked curiously, knowing full well the answer.

Thorin levelled her with an unimpressed look. "That's not what they are for," he said. "Guarding you is a full-time occupation."

"A dozen of them? Are they really necessary?"

"They are, apparently, as I have already read reports of threats to your person."

Hem's fingers splayed out before her in exasperation. Must everything be blown out of proportion?

"One time. And she was just a pickpocket. There was no harm done." Though she herself had been rattled at the time, but that was besides the point.

"If that is meant to appease me, you are failing miserably. An assault made on just your second day makes for a grim prognosis of the rest of your stay. I am surprised she gained such proximity in the first place."

He seemed to think all said was further reason to keep the wolves in their current duty.

"She only thought I was wealthy enough to rob because I had six guards trailin' behind me. They draw more attention than I could ever manage on my own."

Thorin smirked. "That I simply do not believe," he said as he began to rinse his hair, scooping water to pour carefully over the back of his head.

Seeing him perform ordinary tasks like this was strange but cozy. She imagined—hoped—that this was what it could be like when they lived together, going about their evening chores side by side and chatting about work or life or nothing in particular.

"In any case," she forced herself to steer back to the issue, lest she lose her composure with His Royal Righteousness. "I have to do this on my own. I just need more time," she added, perhaps mostly to convince herself.

"What you need is an ally," he rectified.

"What do you mean?"

"Someone who knows the town and the business in it. Someone who is loyal to you—or is susceptible to persuasion, whichever is most convenient."

Certainly sounded good, but she knew Thorin could make any idea sound reasonable, like taking
on five hundred orcs with two hundred men and fifty dwarves.

"If there exists such a qualified person in Esgaroth, why hire me?"

"No one person can do all," he stated sagely. "Remember how Fíli convinced me to bring you on the journey to Blackwater?"

"He said I'd be useful, which was bollocks, of course. I only tagged along."

"The smallest details can have the greatest consequences. You knew the land and the people. Despite the outcome, you saved me time and effort."

She smiled lopsidedly. "I should get myself a spy, you mean?"

"The term is inaccurate," he replied patiently, "but I believe you know what I mean. No one needs to infiltrate the enemy camp or put themselves at risk. It is a matter of information transaction. That is all."

It was a good thought, even though Hem would not know how or where to start. She appreciated the advice none the less.

"You cannot do everything on your own," he said.

"I'm not tryin' to—"

Adamant, Thorin interrupted her. "Are you or are you not placing the weight of an entire city upon your shoulders?"

She attempted to protest, but he struck a nerve, and he probably knew it.

"I'm just helpin' out," she said, trivialising.

"That's right, and do not forget it. Bain can spare you for one day, can he not?" Thorin twisted his long hair and squeezed out most of the water.

"Of course. Don't be ridiculous."

Thorin let go of his hair, letting it hang down his back. He seemed suspicious of her casual tone but perhaps not for the reasons Hem thought.

"He is treating you well, I trust," he said with a calculating sharpness in his eye. Was he looking for something to criticise?

"That wasn't included in the reports?" Hem countered.

"It was, but I would prefer to hear it from you. He is not taking liberties with you?"

The mistrust Thorin had for the lord of Lake Town was immeasurable.

"You wish to discuss liberties?" She had to laugh. "I'm not keepin' him company in the bath, at least."

"You would compare my conduct to his?" he scoffed, seemingly too confounded to take much offense. "The day I bear any resemblance to Bain is the day we both lie rotting beneath earth next to our forebears."
Hem hid a smile.

"It's incomparable," he said. "You know this."

It should not make sense, but it did. Hem had never compared the lord of Erebor and the lord of Esgaroth, due to more reasons than just her fascination with Thorin.

"Aye," she admitted grudgingly. "Though it shouldn't be." A superior was a superior, no matter how friendly.

"There should always be an undisputed distinction between the one who gained your loyalty by arousing pity and the one to whom you are pledged by affinity and respect."

Hem did not find the distinction as clear as he did. She would marry Thorin out of necessity, after all. However, she did not object to sitting there in his washroom.

"Well, I admit I didn't agree out of pity, but I haven't pledged myself to you yet," she challenged.

At her teasing tone, his eyes grew dangerous. Before she knew it, Thorin stood up, sending water violently over the edges, wetting Hemery's dress.

She cried out in surprise but hardly noticed the water on her; she was too busy shielding her eyes, jumping from her seat, and turning away, all without tripping over her feet or catching sight of his form in any of the mirrors or polished brass basins around the room.

"You would never allow any man to place you in this kind of compromising position," he said behind her. "Yet here we are."

"Have you made your point?" she bit out in annoyance, keeping her back to him.

"Aye, I am done." She heard more water hit the stone floor as he stepped out. "Will you be so kind as to hand me that robe?"

*That* robe? As opposed to which other? He knew she was not looking. Where did he mean?

"In front of you," he added.

Ah.

As she lifted her eyes, there it was, straight ahead, hanging on a hook on the wall.

Grabbing it, she held it out with one hand behind her, eyes locked on the wall. When he did not take it, she glanced at him in the general area where his face ought to be. To her surprise, he was also turned away, as if waiting for her to help him into it.

Unbelievable. The gall he had. Which she had, as well, Hem realised. Now that he had his back turned, her good manners completely evaporated. She stared. Unbelievable.

Thorin was dwarf, through and through. Hirsute, strong, heavy, but agile, as she could tell by the high arc of his foot, the indentations at the back of his knees, and the flexing arms responding to his clenching and relaxing fists. Hem now knew the skin covering that body was soft despite the thick slabs of muscle underneath.

True enough, two uneven, red lines of almost healed stitches marred the back of his legs, one across the thigh and the other on the calf.
Forbidding herself from simply gawking at him and making a fool of herself, she raised the robe for his waiting arms to slip into and draped it over his shoulders. Swiftly, she turned away again, so he would not catch her staring.

"Seems you are more comfortable with me when I am broken and bloody rather than when I am whole and clean," Thorin observed astutely.

She carefully glanced over her shoulder, finding him presentable in the tied robe. He met her eyes as he ran a towel over his beard before hanging it around his neck to let it soak up the remaining water in his hair.

When Thorin was hurt and on his knees, he was not as intimidating—this was true, proven by her own bold actions at the time. Now, unarmed in the soft light of candles, the king left a gap in his cold and indifferent exterior to allow a rare display of animation no less intimidating than the outbursts of anger she had witnessed from time to time.

"Because you're at your most humble when you've tasted your own blood," she replied. "Unscathed, you have the most uncanny habit of imposin' your will on everyone and everythin'."

"Everyone but you."

Hem curtsied, spreading her water-stained skirts in feigned honour, as if he paid her a compliment. "I attempt to be ever unaffected, Sire." Straightening, she smiled to diffuse her insubordination. "My success, however, is debatable."

Thorin recognised her jest, his features softening.

"In all your endeavours, I have wished you luck and bestowed my blessing," he said in a leisurely, confident manner as he came towards her. "But in this, for the very first time," he spoke low and near, meeting her gaze unwavering, "I hope you fail."

Then he passed her, heading to the wardrobes in the other room.

"I will dress now," he stated as a warning.

That spurred Hemery's movement, speeding towards the exit. "I'll leave you to it." She had more than enough of the king's moods, entitlement, and brazenness for one day.

"See you at dinner," he called after her.

*Bollocks.*

In the corridor of the south wing, Hemery watched Hanah's guard, Dagrun, with envy. Hem missed the days when all she had to deal with was Bror.

She knocked on the door to Hanah and Fíli's chambers. Within five heartbeats, it opened.

She let Hanah approach her, apprehensive of her mood. But when Hanah saw her sister on the threshold, she embraced Hem a long moment. Breathing out, Hem hugged her back. Until now, she felt like she had not had a moment to relax in seven days.

"Have you eaten?" Hanah asked.
"No, not yet." Hem pushed back stray tendrils from her face.

"Go through and wash. I'll bring you somethin'."

Other times, Hanah's fussing could get on her nerves, but now she was glad for her concern. Nodding, she went on to her room.

Hemery stripped off her dress, and washed her face, hands, and under her arms. Hanah returned with a slice of cheese and dried fruit just as Hem tied the laces of a fresh dress.

"I thought you'd come earlier." Hanah sat down by the fire, her idle hands playing with a napkin.

"I know. I planned to," Hem skirted as she ate small pieces with her hands. "If you wanted, you could've just come down to the lake."

"I didn't want to disturb you."

Hem snorted. She did not think a tea break with her sister could make much difference to her non-progress.

"I'd be glad of some disturbance, to be honest."

Hanah smiled in sympathy. "Bain's fair, yeah?"

"He's fine. Nothin' can touch me. You saw the militia on my heels, didn't you?"

Hanah nodded. "I did."

They looked at each other a moment, then both grinned, sharing the thought of ridiculous dwarves and their sense of unsafe environments.

Another moment passed in silence.

"How's Híli?" Hem asked.

"She's well. A bit too well, actually." Hanah frowned in confused frustration. "She grows restless and gets into trouble with the other children."

"What kind of trouble?" Hem wondered, worried.

Hanah waved a hand, listlessly. "Pranks, gettin' away from her guard, playin' in the old, abandoned tunnels—harmless but infuriatin'."

Regardless of her daughter's behaviour, she could not help a fond, albeit tired, smile.

"Problem is, she's too clever. She learns everythin' after you tell her once—when she listens, that is. I'm runnin' out of things to teach her. Should just put her to work."

"She's too young," Hem said, dismissive.

"I was younger than her when Father left us alone for the first time."

"I know he did the best he could," Hem said, "but how many children of men are left to tend a shop and a household on their own? It's one thing to work, quite another to bear the same responsibilities as labourin' adults."
"She's only half man. And she has metal in her fingers, not leather, so she gets bored in my shop and away she goes. I'm afraid she'll hurt herself with one of her ideas, any day now." She shook her head, banishing the thought. "No, I'll encourage her to spend more time with Dis in her smithy, meltin' and hammerin' to her heart's content. When that no longer works . . ."

"She'll set up her own shop?" Hem said, a bit sarcastic. Hanah humoured her with a tight smile.

"You know dwarves," she said. "Their bodies hold so much energy that they die inside unless they can work with what they love, and you know what they love—stone and metal. Anyway, that's what Dis keeps tellin' me."

Hem had to admit she had a point. "Aye, maybe."

Hanah absently clawed at the thick, dry skin in her palms, as if apprehensive of what she wanted to say. "Híli asks for you, wonderin' when you'll return."

"I'm here now." Hem supplied, though she knew the assurance was too thin to carry any weight. Hem already had this conversation with Thorin; she did not need it with her sister, as well.

"Aye, but it's not the same, is it?" Hanah smiled ruefully. "How long do you think you'll be?" she asked carefully.

"I don't know," Hem snapped but quickly caught herself. "I don't know," she said softer, twirling the ring on her middle finger. "I hoped maybe a month, but—"

She had promised Thorin they would marry in one month, but at present, she had no idea if her assignment would take one month or one year. She looked at Hanah, disheartened, shrugging.

"I honestly don't know."

Hanah absorbed the dejection in her sister's eyes and tense, thin lips, not minding her short tone.

"You'll make it. I know you will." Hanah leaned forward and grasped the hand which nervously played with the ring, holding it still. "You're the most clever person I know."

Hem smiled, appreciating the sentiment but not feeling it resonate. She covered Hanah's hand with her own.

"Thanks, but then again, you don't have very much to compare with, do you?" Hem said, aiming to make light. "I mean, you live with Fee."

Hanah frowned instantly, but her tense mouth betrayed her when a giggle burst forth, accompanied by Hen's own.

When silence stretched once more, Hem knew what was on Hanah's mind.

"Go on. Ask me," Hem said, taking a deep breath.

Hanah just looked at her.

"Come on, let's get on with it," Hem insisted. "Ask me about Thorin."

Hanah bent her head low over their hands, sighing. Then she let go, rose, and stepped back almost to the other side of the room.

"What were you thinkin'?" Hanah hissed in tempered astonishment, as if she feared someone would
overhear. "You've barely recovered from the blow of the stupid, bloody dwarf sellin' your services to the highest bidder, much less had reason to forgive him for it properly, and now you're marryin' him? The king of Erebor?"

"I know you don't approve of marriage—" Hem attempted to negotiate.

"You can marry whomever you want," Hanah protested. "I don't mind marriage. It's this marriage I can't grasp."

Hem folded her arms. She felt like a child again, listening to Hanah's dominant logic, as always.

"I must know," Hanah went on, pressing her palms together worriedly. "Are you enterin' into this of your own free will? No gratitude, no guilt, no bloody duty—none of those distractions?"

"Yes," Hem confirmed, impatiently. "All kiddin' aside, you think I never doubted your sanity durin' your so-called courtship with Fee? Well, I did. But you didn't listen to me, did you? What gives you the right to judge me in this?"

Hanah seemed to gauge Hem's defensive mood and the insecurities behind it. She did not rise to the bait.

"You were twelve years old," she argued calmly. "Which is also when you first met Thorin. You might not remember it the way I do, but you were very impressionable back then. We had just lost our home and lost Father. When we came here, you warmed to Dwalin and Sethie and Thorin much quicker than I expected. I didn't mind. They are good people to look up to. But I just want to make sure that those old wishes of belongin' and family aren't cloudin' your head."

Hanah's words stung fiercer than Hem wanted to admit. But as much as she understood Hanah's concerns, she knew it was only half true. After all, family and belonging was something everyone wished for. However, Hem might have wanted it more than others precisely for those reasons Hanah mentioned. It was why she wanted to go to school like the children of Erebor. It was why she still practiced her craft with her sister though it was not her main occupation. It was why she attended court with the Durins. And it was why she still trained with Dwalin though she had learnt sufficient defensive skills long ago. Hem did it all for belonging and for family.

But even if she felt that Hanah was right, she would never admit it.

"Hem," Hanah said, almost in a whisper, pleading for her to look up. Hanah's eyes bore into hers, as if trying to persuade her to step down from a high ledge. "I know he's very . . . fond of you, but do you want the same things?"

"I want—" Hem tried, but she could not say that she wanted what Hanah had with Fíli because, realistically, there was nothing to indicate that would ever happen. But she wanted Thorin in any way she could have him. "He offers me security and respect. Aside from Dwa, I . . . I value him more than any other man."

Hanah's eyes softened, as if she knew Hemery's true feelings and the selfish reasons behind her decision.

"I—" Hem's voice grew hoarse. "I can't imagine marryin' anyone else."

Hanah kneeled in front of Hemery, taking Hem's hands in hers. They stayed silent a moment.

"He told me how you had defended him against the bloodthirsty orcs," Hanah said softly.
Hem's eyes flew to hers. Thorin had said that when he came to see Hanah?

"He told me of all the times you had defended my honour ever since you were little. And how you always are honest and courageous, in court as well as in battle."

Hem shook her head in disagreement. "I got him in trouble with the orcs," she protested. "And he cannot possibly know whether I'm honest or not. It's pure conjecture—"

"He said you are admirable," Hanah interrupted.

Hem fell silent as that. As much as she wanted to, she could not find the strength to dismiss such a statement. What more did he say?

"And he wanted me to bless your union," she said, pausing. "I told him I'd bless any union my sister decides to enter."

Hem stiffened. She realised that she had already resigned herself to a rift with her sister because she had been convinced of Hanah's disapproval, and when it did not happen, she felt a stone lift from her chest. To her surprise, she felt her eyes burn.

Hanah went on. "As long as it keeps you from bein' dragged back and forth across the land like a wretched pilgrim, I will support any decision you make."

Hem hugged her. Hanah kissed her cheek.

"Even if it includes marriage to a grumpy, stubborn, old goat," Hanah added with a chortle.

Hemery laughed through unexpected tears.
Unexpected Routes

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Everyone else knew. Hemery did not know how they knew, but they did. Even Hlí.

"Now you'll be my real aunt and uncle," she said, beaming.

Hem looked at her sternly. "I've always been your real aunt."

But Hlí was not dissuaded. "Yes, but now you'll be my aunt again—double."

Hem frowned. For the first time, Hem was struck by the fact that Thorin was Hlí's great uncle. What Hem was to Hlí, Thorin was to Fíli—and Fíli was a grown dwarf and a father. Hem wondered if people might find it odd how much older Thorin was than her, even if it was a union of convenience. Then again, she had seen plenty of marriages where the husband was more than twice as old as his wife. But they were marriages of man kind, and Thorin was much older than that.

She would rather not think about it, but she could not deny that these family ties were getting complicated.

"And you never have to leave ever again," Hlí added as a positive reason.

Hem smiled ruefully. "That's the idea," she agreed.

Dinner that night was tense. Or rather, Hem was tense. Hanah was experiencing a brief calm at having her sister home for the evening. Fíli was quiet but observant, and was that a smug twist to his lips? Kíli was quiet but clearly wanted to say something, his eyes darting back and forth across the table. Dis had not said anything other than a short greeting before dinner, but she had embraced Hem when they met. This led Hem to think Dis did not disapprove, at least, of the news. But her features were cool as she regarded her brother at the opposite end of the table.

Yes, they all knew.

Fíli asked a bit about her work in Esgaroth, but since she had made virtually no progress, that conversation soon dwindled. Besides, Fíli was not her employer; she could not really tell him anything about her current work for Bain.

Suddenly, there was a knock on the door, and before Dis voiced her permission for anyone to enter, the door opened.

Dwalin strode into the diningroom as if on a mission. Hem sat up straight in surprise; she had not seen him inside the mountain in years.

Hlí launched herself out of her seat.

"Uncle Dwalin," she greeted cheerfully. He allowed himself to be embraced around the middle and put an arm around her shoulders, squeezing back.

Boldly meeting the eyes of everyone at the table, he finally nodded respectfully to Dis. "M'lady," he grunted.
Fíli stood. "What are you doing here?" he asked, curious. "Can I get you something?"

"No, no, lad," Dwalin muttered humbly. "Just here on business."

When Híli released him, he walked past Hanah and Hemery, patting their heads awkwardly, before coming to stand beside Thorin.

The king, however, did not seem surprised to see him.

Dwalin reached out to press something forcefully into Thorin's hand. It was something small, but Hem could not see what.

Then Dwalin left with a swift "Evenin'", relieved to be silently excused.

Everyone was so perplexed by the sudden visit that no one spoke for a moment.

"Uncle," Kíli asked, finally. "What was that?"

Thorin swiftly pocketed the item. "None of your business," he replied unhurriedly.

Dis's look for Thorin was thoroughly unimpressed, but she did not pursue the matter.

"Hem," Kíli said to catch her attention. "Would you kindly ask Uncle what he has in his pocket?"

Hemery looked up, a bit bothered that he would ask her to pester the king further. She disliked big dinners precisely for this reason, or had Kíli forgotten?

"Your uncle clearly does not wish to tell you. What could I do?" She continued eating.

"Well, you know . . ." He smiled lopsidedly. "You being you, and all. And you being in an especially fortunate position to ask him favours where I can't, because, well, you're . . . you."

Hem sighed. "I have no desire to ask your uncle anythin' on your behalf. And me bein' me has nothin' to do with it," she countered, growing annoyed.

"It does now that you'll be my aunt," he said matter of factly but not without amusement.

Hem's teeth ground together. "It will be an honour for me to officially join this family," she began respectfully, "but if you ever call me that again, I'll rip your—" She caught herself, glancing at Híli. "Ears off," she finished.
Kíli laughed, pleased he managed to rile her so. "Very well, what do you yourself suggest I call you?"

"How about your queen?" Thorin rumbled caustically from the end of the table, "if Miss Hemery's birth name proves insufficient for you."

Kíli checked himself quickly at that, the smile wiped from his face. Even Hemery stilled at the king's abrupt utterance.

"Yeah, I guess that would be the supreme term," Kíli had to agree.

That was another aspect Hem had ignored. Being queen was different from the idea of simply marrying a person who happened to be king. She felt a ripple of fear of what people would think. Not so much her friends and family, but people—the people of Erebor. The sensation clashed violently with her resolution to marry Thorin for the sake of ridding herself of others' opinions. He asked her to marry him in order to rise above, but perhaps she would merely be immersed further.

Hem steadied herself. She was not alone in this; if Thorin did not see it as a problem, then neither would she. She trusted him.

"Queen Hemery," Híli exclaimed, delighted.

Hemery had to laugh at that. It sounded too silly.

"Yes, thank you, love," she said, happy that the girl broke the tension in the room. Híli preened.

Thorin rose from his seat. He passed the table, pausing by Hemery and holding out his hand. Confused, she looked from his hand to his face.

He was not upset but had returned to his usual serious manners and simply offered his hand to her. He had never touched her in public before. The gesture must have some kind of significance, she thought. After a moment's hesitation, she took it. He did not move, just held her palm between broad fingers whose roughness made hers look fragile in comparison.

"Excuse me," he said. "I have work to do this evening."

Then he let go, gently lowering her hand before dropping it completely, and left. When he passed Dis's chair, Thorin squeezed her shoulder. She did not look up.

Opposite Hemery, Kili was smiling again.

"You know what I'm thinking?" he said as soon as Thorin was gone.

"You can think it, and I'll just judge you for it in my head. No one has to speak, and all stays well within these walls," Hem proposed, hoping he would leave it alone. He did not.

"Within a decade, you managed to get closer to Uncle than anyone else—you're marrying him—and yet, you refuse to use that power."

"Power," Dis scoffed into her drink.

"I just wanted to know what was in his pocket." Kíli looked at Hem disappointed.

Fíli chuckled as he stood. "And now, because of your own impatience, you'll never know," he said, clapping his hand on his brother's shoulder. He picked up Híli to settle her in his arms. "Come now, let's bid the future queen good night."
"Goodnight, Queen Hemmy," Hili giggled.

"Goodnight, Queen Hemmy," Fili echoed, but where Hili's smile was purely joyful, his was gleeful.

Hemery sighed. Glee had to be better than resentment.

When Hemery returned to The Galley at noon the following day, she saw a guard outside the inn from a block away—one of Bain's guards. She was just about to ask Vannur what she thought he was doing there, and if he was perhaps waiting for her, when Lida appeared before them in the street.

Hemery would later reflect on the irony of how easily she could spot a Lake Town soldier from miles away but not see a dwarf lass until she wanted to be seen. It explained so many of Esgaroth's problems.

"Someone broke into the treasury last night," Lida said.

Stopping, Hem quickly grasped Bror's arm when he reached for the handle of his axe, but two Wolves presented arms, crossing spears between Lida and Hemery in a show of authority.

Hem looked at her confused.

"I hope you're not accusin' me of the crime," she said, while severely doubting Lida's truthfulness.

"I just thought you'd want to know since it might affect Bain's ability to pay for . . . whatever services you provide," Lida explained ambiguously.

Vannur drew her sword to point the tip a hair's breadth from Lida's ear. "That's enough of your insolence, mahakhkhadûna."

Lida backed up, raising her hands but lowering her head in humility, though Hem had no reason to believe it was genuine.

"I only mean that whatever the reason for your presence, m'lady, this will be of interest to you since you are clearly doing the king's errand here."

What did the girl want this time? Was this some scheme to gauge Hemery's financial ties to both courts?

"I'm not appointed by the king," Hem replied curtly but regretted it instantly. She did not need to explain herself. Especially not to someone who had already tried to take advantage of Hem for her money.

"You have his guards and have business at Bain's court every day this past week. I know that means something—"

"You know nothin'." Hemery felt bad for her harsh tone, but the dwarf was way too curious for her own good; she would only be trouble.

Lida fell silent.

Hemery took a deep breath and spoke softer. "I'm not discussin' this with you. You'll excuse me, I have matters to attend."
The procession moved past Lida.

When they reached The Galley, the Esgarian guard approached.

"Lady Hemery," he said, catching her attention. "Lord Bain requests your presence," he continued.

"I'll be at the courthouse within the hour," she dismissed with a wave, attempting to go inside. She was tired and wanted to wash and eat before going back to work.

"I'm afraid it cannot wait, m'lady," the guard insisted.

This made her pause, worried. "Why?"

"The treasury has been robbed," he informed.

So the little thief was right.

Damn.

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Five guards had been overwhelmed and beaten, the doors torn off their hinges, and the chamber cleaned out. No witnesses and no trace except a few broken locks on the doors leading out from the treasury.

"Why does it smell like bad eggs in here?" Hemery asked when she looked around the empty room.

"Explosives," Bain explained. "They weren't after gold or silver—they took five barrels of black powder that were stored in here."

"Explosives?" Hem echoed in surprise. "Stored here, in the middle of the city?" Sounded dangerous. One candle, one small flame, could ignite the powder and destroy hundreds of square feet.

"They were transported here on their way from Erebor to the south. Was only supposed to be kept safe a few days. The shipping masters thought it better than to leave the barrels at the docks out in the open. Guess they were wrong," he trailed off gravely.

"But most of these vaults are made to store the city's funds, yes?"

"That's correct."

Nothing stolen but the barrels. The thieves knew what they wanted, and when and where to get it.

"Do you know how this could happen?" she asked, though she already had a theory.

"The guards protested heartily when they were sent home to heal and rest, but when they learned they would still receive full pay, they gave in. So I ruled them out as suspects in this deed. What's more, there was only one person who knew the content of this room, where it was located, and the number of guards patrolling the area."

"You?"

Bain smiled without humour.
"Afraid not. I knew there was black powder somewhere in my stores, but not exactly which one. I don't keep all valuables in one place— I've grown too careful for that in recent years. And the different treasuries are unmarked and unofficial in order to keep them hidden. Each guard and each book keeper has no knowledge of the other sites besides the one they serve at. Fortunately for us, the barrels came in yesterday, and only one book keeper knew what was in them. A man named Aksel."

Hemery felt her heart beat with excitement.

"Have you questioned him?" she asked.

"Quite thoroughly," Bain replied diplomatically. His head of security was probably both violent and threatening in his interrogation tactics. "He's in gaol, but he won't name his accomplices or what they'd planned with the powder."

If his fear of reprisals from Lord Bain was not enough to talk, the poor bastard was most likely coerced into committing the crime by some rather nasty people.

"What of the other clerks? Does he have friends here, someone he might have talked to?"

"If he did, he never gave them reason to believe anything was amiss. But he did ask for advance pay sometimes, only to stop a few months ago. Apparently, he found a way to solve his financial problems elsewhere."

Hem studied the breaks on the door jambs. Sharp, long cuts from axes; the same they used on the soldiers. Forceful and ruthless. She felt her stomach turn.

"I'd like you to talk with his family," Bain said. "Out in the Ashes."

The Ashes was an old part of town where houses had been mostly spared from the dragon's fire, but not completely unscathed. The walls still dripped black when it rained, and no one in those neighbourhoods could afford to build new ones. People who called themselves respectable did not venture near them. Then again, people who called themselves respectable mostly seemed like tossers, Hem found.

She glanced at him thoughtfully, not giving away her apprehension, before resuming her scrutiny of the hallway outside the door. The window by the storage room was smashed. Below was a fifteen feet drop to the canal. Perhaps they had lowered the barrels down onto a boat to get away.

"Is he married?" she asked.

"Yes, with children, I believe. See if the wife has any idea of how he really makes his money."

She nodded, understanding his intention. Hemery would be a kind face to confide in for a woman who feared for her husband and family. They were not well off if the lived in the Ashes.

It would not be easy. She would have to appear harmless but authoritative and comforting at the same time; her dress would not do. Her guards would not do. And she would need help to get there. But the idea had merit, and after giving it some thought, Hem was prepared to try.

"I can do that," she said simply.
In her study at the courthouse, Hemery wrote a message on a sheet of paper, folded it, sealed it, and handed it to Vannur.

"Find Lida, and give her this for me."

Vannur regarded her warily before accepting the letter.

"I don't want to use you as a handmaiden," Hem apologizes. "But I don't have anyone here I trust, and Bror would flay the lass as soon as speak to her."

"I see, Miss." Though Vannur's tone was reluctant, Hem felt relief that she was about to oblige her. Vannur was turning to go when it struck her.

"And don't read it, please," Hem called out, perhaps a bit louder than strictly necessary. "If you do, I'll know," she warned.

Vannur did not seem offended, at least, because she cheekily asked in return, "Do you think the lass even knows how?" before disappearing.

Hemery told the other guards she needed to go to her quarters in order to eat and change clothes. She was hungry, and she needed to lose the dress if she wanted to move about without attracting attention; but she decided she would leave without informing her guards.

At The Galley, she exchanged her dress and coat for her old leather trousers and tunic while the guards waited downstairs. With a scarf draped over her head as well as around her neck, hiding most of her face, she carefully exited her room and headed for the back stairs. At the back door, she spotted two of the Wolves and turned back around.

Usually, she cursed them for not heeding her advice about wearing the royal crest and colours so obviously while on the lake, but this time, she did not mind as it made them all the more easy to spot—and therefore also to avoid.

Climbing the stairs again, Hem found a window halfway up. It was narrow, but she managed to escape through it onto the roof above the stable. She dropped down from there onto some bales of hay on a cart and then to the street. Without looking around for her guards, she walked briskly down the block and turned a corner before breaking into a half run. She felt certain her guards would not be able to follow when she neared a big market, and deliberately slowed down to a leisurely walk through the throng of people. But still, she went on.

There, at a corner by the tavern where Hemery used to meet Dwalin many years ago, stood Lida. Suspicious, she watched the patrons of the ale house which was full even in the afternoon. When Hem neared, Lida met her gaze with keen eyes below a tentative brow. Prepared, but for what, Lida could not know. Hemery had only asked that Lida meet her here, not saying why.

"I wasn't sure you'd come," Hemery said.

"Don't bite the hand that feeds," Lida said in way of reply, shrugging. "Even if it was only the once."

Hem nodded in understanding. Clearly, Lida had survival strategies. The street was her home, and Hem counted on it.

"How would you like to make some more coin?"

Lida's eyes flitted over Hemery's clothes, noting the difference.
"You don't want just a sandwich this time, do you, Miss?"

Hem smiled. "Not this time." She glanced over her shoulder, making sure no one was following her. "I want you to take me somewhere."

"Where?" Lida frowned in confusion.

"The Ashes. The home of a man called Aksel, one of Lord Bain's bookkeepers. Three silvers now, five when we return."

The confusion cleared. Lida nodded. "Sure."

Lida showed Hemery through narrow alleys and down murky side streets, where the sounds from the merry inns and music from the markets faded away into muted hollerings behind planks and the barks of chained guard dogs.

Once, Lida asked Hem to stay back as she knocked on a door and spoke in hushed tones with whoever was on the other side. Then they continued, through streets where houses stood so close and tall that Hem had to shuffle sideways a few times, and no water could be seen or heard, but urine and garbage was aplenty.

They came to a dock which creaked under their feet, and Lida pointed to a door at the end.

Hem had no idea how Lida could be sure it was the right place. She guessed she would soon find out whether Lida was worth the money Hem spent.

"Pretty shabby for a state-paid man," Lida commented. "Guessing he's not very good at his job."

Hem had to agree, but she did not reply.

"Thank you," Hem said. "Wait here."

There was a brief hesitation in Lida's features, but whatever she had been about to say was probably won over by the promise of the five silver coins because she settled and kept quiet.

Hemery knocked.

A woman answered, her hair loose with a baby girl on her hip. She looked Hem up and down.

"Who are you?" she asked, brow creased with impatience.

"My name is Hemery Skinner. I work for Lord Bain."

The woman frowned in anger. "They say Lord Bain arrested my husband. Where is he?"

"Are you Aksel's wife?"

"I am Leena. Where is he?" she insisted.

"He's safe, but he won't be home for a while."

Leena squeezed her eyes shut briefly, a harsh sigh pushed out through her nose.

"You might be able to help him. If you tell me who he's workin' with, there is a chance his
punishment will be lessened." It was not a lie, but it was not a promise Hemery could make with a clear conscience.

"I'm not a rat," Leena hissed. She pulled the door shut but not before Hem pushed it back open. "Rats are not the only ones who gets crushed when the job is done and strings are left loose."

Leena glared at her through the crack in the door, but she said nothing. "What do you think they'll do to your husband now that he's caught and no longer useful?"

Fear flashed across Leena's face, then resolve. She opened the door fully. "Get in here before someone sees you," she growled, not at all happy about her options.

Hem entered a small but clean kitchen. Grey light filtered through grey windows. Leena put the child down in the other room before joining her.

"I knew something like this would happen," Leena complained low. "But he just told me not to worry." She scoffed, shaking her head in joyless irony.

"Why did he do it?" Hem asked.

Finally, Leena looked her straight in the eye. "He gambles," she admitted through tense lips. "Plays cards. And he owed some people money."

It was difficult to talk about, Hem understood. The shame and frustration Leena felt must be overwhelming.

"This time, he said, would be the last. It would all get sorted—no more debt." Her stiff chin told Hem that she never really believed that.

"So the people he owed money to coerced him into the helpin' them?" Hem asked. Leena nodded. "Where did he meet these people?"

Leena shrugged. "All over. Wherever there were games. He didn't care."

"Did Aksel ever mention any names?"

Leena looked out the dirty window. Hem could not fathom what she saw out there except the view of her dire circumstances.

"I know you're afraid," Hem said. "But it will be worse if those people will be free to do this again and again. And what do you think will happen when your husband's in gaol and is nothin' but a liability? *You'll* be a liability. Whether you know anythin' or not, whether you tell me anythin' or not, you're in danger, and your children are in danger as long as those people out there."

The floor creaked. Leena looked towards the back room where her daughter appeared.

"Mama, I'm hungry," she mumbled softly.

"C'mere, love," Leena beckoned, picking the girl up. She regarded Hem over the child's small shoulder.
Hem looked back with pleading eyes. "I won't tell anyone that I've seen you. I'll do all I can to keep your family safe."

She could see the struggle in Leena, the fear. What would happen to her children if her husband stayed in gaol? If someone came after them?

"Beren," Leena said.

Hem's eye grew wide. "What did you say?"

"That's who Aksel said he owed money," Leena confirmed. "Beren."

Hem's mind still reeled when she left Leena. She hardly noticed Lida fall into step with her along the dock.

"Alright?" Lida asked.

"Fine," Hem replied automatically.

"You want to go back?"

"Yeah, I need to go back now." There was much to do now. "Quickly."

Lida nodded. "Right." She looked around, then settling on a different path than they had come. "This way is shortest."

Briefly, Hem wondered why they had not taken that road to begin with, but she had no time to formulate a question before Lida was talking again.

"Who's Beren?"

Hem stopped, putting a hand on Lida's shoulder for her to do the same. Lida's back came to rest against a wall.

"You what?" Hem's eyes bore into Lida's.

The little dwarf thief had been eavesdropping. Of course. Hem should not have expected anything less. However, she was more disappointed that Lida was not smarter about it—she simply told Hem at once instead of keeping it to herself and make her own inquiries.

"If you want to see the rest of the silver I promised," Hemery warned, "you'll forget that name. And forget we were ever here today."

Hem let go and kept moving, but Lida was not deterred.

"If you need him found," she went on. "I can help." Eager for more money or approval—Hem did not know.

She scoffed at Lida's stubbornness. "Maybe you can. That's not the problem."

"Then what is it?"

"You don't know what you're gettin' yourself into. You don't know Beren. If he's a part of this, he's dangerous. And I still have no proof, just a name from a weak man's mouth."
"You know him?"

"I know of him," Hem settled.

Beren was a warmaster with a habit of making trouble. If his earlier punishments had made him resent authority, he could cause major problems for Erebor as well as Esgaroth. He was a lethal dwarf with no empathy. Hemery had never trusted him, but she never thought he would ignore his duty and betray his king like this.

If he had been conducting illegal activities in Bain's city behind Thorin's back, this could just be the tip of the mountain. And even Beren could not have pulled this off without help. Who knew how deep the rot had spread in Esgaroth. And what would they use the black powder for? Hem's mind spun out of control, fearing who and how many would be destroyed by Beren and his friends' plans.

"I won't make contact," Lida negotiated. "I'll just—"

"What?" Hem asked coldly. "You'll ask around, make him aware that someone's lookin' for him? Tip him off, and make him careful? I now have Leena and her family on my conscience—I cannot be responsible for you, as well."

"If you give me a chance. I want to help—"

"Why would you help me?" Hem spat, tilting her head sharply to scrutinise Lida, pointing a finger at her chest.

The world was shifting before her eyes. Bad men and deceitful dwarves worked together to rip off Bain for profit or some other evil scheme. Who was to say Lida was trustworthy?

"What's in it for you?" Hem pushed the issue. "We're not kin. Why do you care what I do? You seem to have enough problems yourself. Why are you here? Without family, without friends?"

"That's not—" Lida stopped herself then shook her head resolutely. "That's none of your business," she said, calm but defensive. "I just know I could be of use to you, and you can pay me for my time. It's good business, that's all."

Her jaws worked underneath the skin of her cheek. She was not as unbothered as she would like to be.

Hemery sighed, opening her fists which apparently had cramped closed on their own. Her nails came away sticky from her palms, too sticky for just sweat, but she refused to check.

Lida was right; her personal life was none of Hem's business. But Hem felt more than ever how no one in the city could be trusted.

They heard the scuffle of boots from behind. Hem whirled around.

Two young men, children really, crowded the narrow pathway from which Hem and Lida had come. Swiftly, Lida looked the other way. Following her eyes, Hem noticed two more closing in up ahead.

Their faces were clean, but their hands were dirty, grey like the soot that settled around chimneys or the ashes from which this neighborhood was named. The boys could not have been older than seventeen.
"Out for an afternoon' stroll, Li?" the tallest boy asked.

"Leave it, Petir," Lida said, nonchalant, but Hem detected a stiffness to her neck that was not there before. "We're just passing through."

The boy sauntered closer, shuffling his feet leisurely.

"Well, there's your problem. You must be allowed to pass. You know that." He stopped at arm's length. "Do you have a pass?"

Lida ignored his question. "So you're a clerk now, giving out passes to everyone in your territory who pays the fee? And here I thought you were all fists and no smarts," she taunted boldly. "Then again, you've always been nothing but an errand boy. Guess your boss finally realized it too."

Petir's calm amusement faded. "He doesn't like freeloaders. It's time you got that through your thick skull, since it's not gettin' through your skin."

"And risk getting flogged by his rivals instead? No, I'll pass, thanks. We'd better be off."

In one quick motion, Lida picked up the lid of a barrel close by, turned, swung it, and struck one of the boys in the face. Hem caught on. Clearly, Lida deemed it necessary to fight their way out of this one.

As another approached, she threw one of her knives at his head, the handle hitting him on his forehead. She did not want to kill anyone, and the blow was only enough to disorient him a moment.

The one left closest to the alley's exit lunged forward as if to grab her around the middle, trusting his own size and strength while completely underestimating hers. Hem punched him in the stomach, and as he bent over to catch his breath, she shoved a hard knee in his soft face.

Now that one pathway lay clear, Lida tipped a barrel over and kicked it down the alley so it rolled toward the other boys, hindering their pursuit.

She grabbed Hem's sleeve.

"Go!"

Hem did not argue.

Lida led the way, squeezing through gates and climbing over planks, jumping on crates and skirting the water's edge. They heard the boys hollering behind.

When Lida reached one of the greater fairways, Hem expected her to turn and run along the dock to the crowded markets in order to lose them. But Lida did not slow at the water. Instead she stepped off a shallow pole used for anchoring, jumping out over the water onto a passing barge.

Hem was too surprised and did not have the presence of mind to copy Lida's exact movements, but aimed her jump straight from the dock's edge. She landed in the water, clinging to the barge with her hands. The early spring winds had no heating effect on the ice-cold water of the Long Lake, not to mention how filthy it was.

She managed to pull herself up, Lida's hands helpfully tugging at her belt. But they had no time for rest. The bargeman waved and shouted at them from his place at the stern. Apparently, he did not appreciate freeloaders rocking his boat either.
Lida clapped Hem on the shoulder, indicating she should follow. They jumped onto another boat passing in the opposite direction. Hem lamented how much more difficult movement proved to be in cold, soaked leather. Shortly, they jumped off again on the dock on the other side of the fairway, a much shorter leap.

Glancing over her shoulder, Hem saw the boys emerging on the other side of the water where she and Lida had first jumped. Lida did not wait to see if they would try the same route; she kept going through the streets, only slower this time. They were out of The Ashes; Hem recognised the area now. About time—she was beginning to shiver.

"You good?" Lida asked.

"Fine. A bit chillier than I would have liked for the first swim of the season."

Lida chortled. Mostly nerves, Hem guessed.

"Mind tellin' me why we just beat up four boys not even old enough to wipe their own bloody noses?" Hem asked when she had caught her breath.

"They work for the butcher." Lida literally spat on the ground. "He doesn't like it when his boys get cheated on business by other thieves without contract, so to speak—we who refuse to give him a share in exchange for protection. Protection from him, that is."

"Thieves have contracts?" Hem asked, astounded.

"Made in blood," Lida said, pulling up her sleeve. On her stubby arm were two crosses, scars made by hand, on purpose. "They've tried to teach me my place twice." She shrugged. "Guess I'm a slow learner."

Lida did not pity herself, that much was clear, so Hem should not either. She respected Lida for telling her this. It was a sign of good faith that Hem would not ignore.

"That's my impression of you so far," Hem agreed, trying to jest. Lida smirked.

"I don't think they'll allow a third strike. That's why I'm helping you," Lida said. "I want to earn more coin, so I can leave here. I can't do that picking pockets for coppers. I want to live in Erebor where work is good, where all are treated equal, and no one has to steal in order to eat."

That was not exactly true; Erebor had its problems. But it was better than here, Hem reckoned.

"I understand." Hemery nodded, feeling a needle prick her heart. "If you don't mind me askin', what happened to your family?"

Lida was quiet a moment. "They're dead. My father died in the battle thirty years ago, and mother died last year. She was a blacksmith."

"Then why . . . ?" Hem shook her head in confusion. Why would Lida steal to eat if she could have learned a skill, a real profession, from her mother?

"There's no lack of blacksmiths in Esgaroth," she explained.

Yes, in a competitive market, prices plummeted and skills were tested. Unless she was exceptionally skilled, like many other dwarves and men in the city and nearby, Lida's mother could have had a hard time earning enough to feed more than herself.
Hemery looked around. Soon they would be back at The Galley where Hem had to face Vannur, Bror, and Ulvar. She groaned, not at all looking forward to their disappointed—disapproving—faces.

"You know what," she said, pausing in the street. "Here's your silver." Hem reached into her pocket and produced five coins. Lida accepted them, quickly putting them away into a breast pocket inside her tunic.

"You've helped me enough today, but come by The Galley in the mornin' before I leave for the courthouse. I'll see if I can find a job for you."

Lida's eyes sparked with life, but then they shifted over Hem's shoulder, and she recoiled. Hem turned, following her gaze.

Bror headed down the street towards them, stormclouds in his eyes. He was probably patrolling the area where Hem had last been seen, coordinated in the search for her, when he saw them

"Good day, Miss," Lida said hurriedly, bowing her head. "Much obliged." Then she disappeared towards the market. Hem did not blame her.

She took a deep breath and began moving in Bror's direction, painfully aware of the cold, wet clothes clinging heavily on her. It had been a long day, and it was not even suppertime yet.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to The Dwarrow Scholar for the Khuzdul. I've taken the liberty of applying it as I see fit without much thought to linguistic correctness.

mahakhkhadûna: she who continues to bite
"What happened?" The captain of the Iron Wolves asked as soon as Bror escorted Hemery back to The Galley.

"Nothin'," Hemery dismissed. "There was somethin' I had to do. But I'm back now, alive and well, so no need to fuss." Hemery swept herself in a quilt and put some water for tea to boil over the fire.

In the same instance, Vannur stormed in through the door to Hem's chambers, not even bothering to knock. At the sight of Hem's wet clothes, her face turned to stone.

"Where did the uthrab go?" Vannur asked through tense jaws. "Let me find her. I swear, she will never bother you again, Miss."

Hemery had only been gone an hour, but it seemed enough for Vannur to build up a blood thirst for whomever she believed responsible for Hem's supposed abduction.

"It's not her fault," Hem said, sitting down by the fire. She wished they would just leave already so she could change into something dry and warm. "I paid her to guide me through the Ashes. This," she pulled off her soaked boots and tossed them in front of the grate, "is my own carelessness."

Vannur's eyes rose briefly to the ceiling in disbelief and frustration. But she held back on whatever she wanted to say.

"You must realise the consequences of such a disappearance," Ulvar said. "Lord Bain himself was questioned, and he sent out his own patrols to look for you."

Hem sighed to herself. Her plan had not worked at all as well as she thought.

"Had you not been returned before nightfall, I would have been forced to send word to the king."

Hem's eyes flew to Ulvar at that, glaring at him. But she tried to keep calm.

"Apologies for your waste of time and energy. That was not my intention," she said civilly. "I did leave a note here for you. Did you not find it?"

"Yes, we found it," Vannur confirmed, sighing, seemingly deflating with her fading anger. "Little help that is was."

"In the future," Hem said, "only organise a search if I'm gone for more than three hours."

"M'lady," Ulvar interjected, "we cannot perform our duties thusly. You are not supposed to venture unsupervised, for any amount of time—"

"Unsupervised?" Hem echoed, incredulous. The word made it sound as if Thorin had ordered them to herd her like an animal or a prisoner. She knew deep down it was not their intention, nor was it Thorin's, but the word choice sat ill with her. She found it difficult to keep her temper in check.

"I appreciate your concern for my well being, but make no mistake—I will move about as I see fit, even if that sometimes means alone."

"The king's orders—"

Hem cut him off. "The king may be your employer, but he is not mine. When your watch involves
me, I give the orders. You can put *that* in your report to your commander," she spat.

Captain Ulvar threw an uncertain look at Vannur and Bror. Vannur watched Hem with her usual amount of well-meaning sternness. Bror just stood by. He was used to Hemery's displeasure towards surveillance and seemed to wait it out stoically.

"Just leave, will you?" Hemery said impatiently. She was tired of arguing with people who were supposed to help her. She was hungry, wet, and cold, and just wanted to wash away the smell of lake water.

She leaned forward towards the fire, warming her hands, as she heard the door open and close behind the dwarves. But a glance told her that Vannur remained.

"If I may, m'lady . . ." Vannur said, waiting.

"If you need to ask permission just to speak, then I should be able to forbid you from doin' things as well."

"Respectfully, Miss," Vannur went on, "we are soldiers, all of us, doing what soldiers do."

"I don't want soldiers," Hem replied petulantly.

"It's just for now," Vannur reminded her. "When you are queen, it will all be different. You will make your own rules."

Hemery's hands stayed cold. There was that word again, the title she would soon bear.

She looked out through the window at the rooftops. The sun peered low in the late afternoon, colouring walls and shingles red. Outside, people and their dogs, carts, and boats moved by below, going about their business. Meanwhile, here sat the next queen of Erebor with her wet tunic, smelling like low tide.

"Until then," Vannur said, softer, gauging Hem's mood, "might you endure? No more excursion—at least not without me, Bror, or Raín."

Hem did not like it, but it was a compromise. A compromise with a dwarf was a big deal, headstrong creatures that they were.

"I will not let it interfere with my work," Hem insisted.

"And I will try to not let your work interfere with mine, Miss Hemery." Vannur bowed her head and left.

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*Kíli, dear brother,*

*I hope all is well because I need your help. Though I have little proof, I have reason to suspect that Warmaster Beren was involved in a robbery at Bain's treasury last night. Could you please—as quietly as possible—find out where he was last night and where he is right now, and whether he engages in gambling or underhanded business dealings? Is he on active duty or is he missing?*

*Five barrels of black powder was stolen, so one must assume whatever motivated the robbery is still to come—and whoever committed it are yet to show their hand.*

*If you are at all able, please avoid involving your uncle in this inquiry?*
"Aksel definitely knows Beren," Bain said when he met with Hemery at the court that same night. "Just hearing the name made him sweat."

Grim satisfaction hummed in Hem's limbs as she sat across from Bain in his study, leisurely twirling the ring on her finger.

Bain went on.

"He was clever enough to realise that if we knew Beren was his accomplice, anyone would believe Aksel was the one to give us that information. Since he'd rather take my punishment for his crime than suffer Beren's retaliation, Aksel admitted to being in his debt and helping to steal the barrels. However—"

Hem sat up in apprehension. They had been so close to a solution, but naturally, something else was wrong now. Damn it all.

"Beren was not there at the time of the robbery. Two men and two women had come to Aksel's home in the middle of the night, and he had shown them the way to the treasury, but he knew no names. He might recognise them if he saw them again, but he claims to know nothing else."

"But this is still progress," Hem maintained, trying to find something to hold on to. "It still connects Beren to Aksel and the robbery."

"But we have nothing but Aksel's word on that."

Slippery, bloody bastards. More people working in the shadows.

Hem's mind spun. Now she had to rely on Kili and hope he could provide some insight to Beren's situation. She just prayed the real story would come to light before somebody used that black powder.

She would leave for Erebor in the morning, Hemery decided. She wanted to waste no time with letters and messengers.

"I'm glad you did not disappear for long today," Bain said, interrupting her thoughts.

"I was doin' your bidding, m'lord," Hem defended.

"I thought as much," he said, smirking knowingly.

"No harm done. Though I regret wastin' your resources," Hem tried to trivialise.

"It was only an hour. As you say—no harm. Though those dwarves of yours are not to be trifled with."

She could only imagine what they had said and how they had treated Bain while they looked for her, but he seemed to find it equally unsettling and amusing.

"They're not my dwarves," she said, apologetically. "They follow the king's orders, not mine."

"He does not have any hold over you now that you're here, surely?" Bain frowned.
Too late Hem recognised where this conversation was going. But it would not be a secret much longer; and she did not want to lie to Bain about why Thorin sent all those guards.

"The king is compelled to assign guards to me because he believes it's his duty," she began carefully.

"Whatever for? If anyone should assign you guards, it is I. You work for me, after all."

"For now," she amended. "Fact is that—in a few weeks—I will . . . be wed. To him," she finished lamely, trying to keep her chin up.

"Pardon," Bain frowned in confusion. "To whom?"

"King Thorin," she replied patiently.

Bain was silent a long moment, his eyes darting from Hemery to the door to his desk. She guessed he must be evaluating the truthfulness of this statement and finally accepting her words.

"Then you must return to Erebor," he said solemnly.

"What?" Now it was Hem's turn to frown. "Why?"

"As my extended eyes and ears, you have already been put into harm's way today. If something were to truly happen to you while in my city, King Thorin would make my lordship into an even worse torment than it already is, or just depose me in disgrace."

Hemery gritted her teeth. "Nothin's changed. Thorin knew I would complete my work here before anythin' ever—"

"I cannot risk it."

"Am I suddenly more fragile now than I was this mornin'?" Hem fumed.

However, she knew why Bain feared Thorin. Bain was dependent on Thorin's favour, and he did not want another reason added to the list of things the king disliked about him. Of course she understood. But she did not like it and would not play fair.

"Without me," Hem said, "you have no hope of findin' Beren. If he surrenders, he will answer to no one but his king, and Thorin might keep him prisoner for what he did, but you will never learn who the other offenders are in your own city."

That was not completely true; she hoped Thorin would have no knowledge of Beren's actions until Kili made him confess all he knew about the robbery. And even then, she hoped Thorin would be involved only as a judge in Beren's trial when all was settled. If Thorin knew about the robbery and how Hemery ran around Esgaroth chasing clues, as opposed to safely debating in a council room, he would likely come to the same conclusion Bain did a moment ago. She could not let that happen; she needed to see this through. She had given her word—to Bain, to Leena, and to Lida.

Hemery leaned forward, intent on pleading to Bain's own interests. "I'll make sure you get the information you need."

Bain rubbed both hands down his face. Then he sat back in his chair tiredly.

"When the robbery is resolved, your contract is done, and you will return to Erebor," he settled. "If you wed before such a time, you will walk away from the inquest. Is that clear?"
"Aye, m'lord." She nodded once in agreement.

Hopefully, she would not need more time than that. She had complete confidence in Kíli and his captains. They would find Beren and put the fear of the Durins into him.

Hemery had taken no more than five steps on the wooden street outside The Galley the next morning before a voice called out to her.

"Going on a trip?" Lida asked from a shallow dugout boat in the canal as she floated parallel to Hem's path, eyeing the bag slung over Hem's shoulder.

Damn it. Hem had forgotten that she asked Lida to meet her. A short paddle in hand, Lida seemed to have remembered yesterday's complications and made preparations accordingly. Clever. Pity Hem had no use of it today.

"I'm afraid I must go to Erebor for a few days," Hem replied, pausing at the edge of the dock.

Lida said nothing, only looking back with a frown. Hem was not sure if the face was due to displeasure or the sun rising in her line of sight.

"I'll tell you what, though," Hem said, lowering herself to one knee to speak lower. "I'd like to know where dwarves go to play cards and dice in this town. Obviously not every establishment is open to all kinds. Perhaps you can be helpful in that capacity?" She raised an eyebrow meaningfully.

Lida smirked. She was sharp enough to gather that Hem was looking for the places Beren frequented.

"Perhaps," she said.

Hemery put a hand on her purse, but Lida stopped her.

"No rush," she said. "You'll owe me. If you don't come back here in three days to pay me, I'll find you."

Her design was clearly to keep their connection alive, Hem mused, but it was all right. While there was little chance that the information Lida would collect was crucial, it was still a good lead if Beren was nowhere to be found. Hem would make sure to see Lida again.

"I know you will," Hem said and watched as Lida paddled south before turning to move north with Vannur, Bror, and the Wolves.

Kíli met Hemery and her companions in the great entry hall, as if he had been notified of her approach by a sentinel.

He embraced her in welcoming greeting but spoke softly in her ear. "There's a problem."

"What?" Hem asked as they parted.

"We found Beren," he said, gesturing for her to follow him to the dungeons.

"That's . . . great." She tilted her head at him, confused. "How is that a problem?"

"I received your message late last night. By the time we tracked him down, he was rather drunk—
off his arse, to be precise. Let's just say he did not come quietly," he explained as though it was a
great understatement.

Hemery drew in breath between her teeth and screwed up her nose, fearing the worst. "How bad is
it?"

"I tried to get him talking, but he remembered very little of how he got into a cell, and throw in a
paralysing, ale-induced headache in there . . . Well." Kfli shook his head.

"He's not sayin' anything?"

"No, he's saying plenty. But nothing of what I asked him, and now I can't get him to shut his
bloody gob."

True enough, half way down the first cell block, Hem heard echoes of heated words being slung
out into the corridor, bouncing of stone walls.

"Is someone in there with him now?"

"No, that's just it," Kfli said with emphasis. "There hasn't been anyone in there for hours."

Hem could hear traces of "How dare you . . .", "I demand justice . . .", and "Reclaim sense . . .", but
all went unheeded.

"Uncle forbade anyone to speak to him until he calms down."

Hem twitched at that. "Thorin?"

"Aye, that's the problem I mentioned," Kfli said, rubbing the back of his neck with an apologetic
wince. "Beren made such a clamour when he was brought in that there was no avoiding it. But I
think this could be a good thing," he remedied with a lilt to his voice. "Thorin is the only one who
has any hope of whipping him in line, or perhaps even the threat of never seeing the king—to be
denied a chance to plead his case—that could be enough to make Beren incriminate himself."

Hemery sighed. "I guess."

"Otherwise, Beren could draw this out for weeks, the dim sod. And I suspect you need answers as
soon as possible."

They reached Beren's cell where he was still barking his rage out like the leashed dogs in the
Ashes. Hem bent over at the waist and pulled out a small plug in the middle of the door, peering at
him through the narrow peep hole. The soft noise was enough to trigger an even more forceful
onslaught of bile from within when he realised he was being watched. Hem plugged the hole.

Aye, it was Beren. At least, by the way he was carrying on, he could not hear them on the other
side.

"You're probably right," Hem said to Kfli. "He should tire himself out soon. Hope he'll have his
voice left when the time comes."

The two turned to walk back up to the third floor.

"So now we wait?"

"Seems so," Kfli shrugged with a carefree grin. "Up for some food?"
On the third floor of the south wing, another dwarf unleashed his anger through words fuelled by hot temper.

As Hemery and Kíli passed, the door to Thorin's study flew open and three soldiers exited in a hurry, chased by the king’s orders.

"See it done," he barked at them.

Brushing by as they left, Hem recognised them as old warmasters, generals in the king’s army. She guessed Thorin was tightening the noose around their necks, wanting to know how any of his soldiers could be suspected of criminal actions and wanting to make sure no one ever would be again.

If Hem and Kíli thought Thorin would go back to his business so they could sneak by the open door unnoticed, they were very much mistaken.

The king's voice sounded clearly and forcefully through the doorway, not brokering any options. "Kíli. Hemery. Come here."

Hemery glanced at Vannur and Bror. Vannur nodded assuring, but the tense corners of her mouth betrayed her confidence. Even Bror had the decency to look away since he could not muster any encouragement, neither by will nor duty. They would wait outside.

Kíli motioned for her to enter before him, as if to say 'ladies first'. Fine.

Thorin stood behind his desk, resting one hand at his belt, the other on the back of his chair. Hem and Kíli came to stand on the opposite side.

"Well, this was a cheap shot from the flank," Thorin grumbled, exasperated, roughly tidying papers on his desk. One handful crumpled in his fist and was tossed carelessly into the fireplace.

Hem felt heat in her cheeks. "I was goin' to inform you, Sire. I just wanted more time to confirm—"

"Not you," Thorin cut her off.

Kíli let out an amused snort next to her.

"Beren," Thorin clarified.

"Oh." Hem decided to be quiet until asked.

"Almost a century of service, and now this. Right under my nose." Thorin sat down. "What do we know?"

Both the king and the prince looked at her. This question was apparently aimed at her.

"Almost nothin'." She shook her head helplessly. "We just have theories and the word of one of Bain’s bookkeepers. I still don't know how Beren could have anythin' to do with black powder."

"He's a captain," Kíli said, shrugging. "He could talk to any merchant, smith, or manufacturer without anyone questioning his authority. If he wants to know how to make it, who does it, when it's done, what it's for, how it's used, where it's going—he can find out, easy as anything."

"What exactly is it used for?" Hem asked. She was aware of its explosive quality but not sure why someone would need to acquire any of it.
"Mining mostly," Kíli explained, "but it has devastating effect on whatever element one choses to ignite it on."

 Anything that violent could be used as a weapon, Hemery feared. General destruction.

 "It doesn't explain his ambition, though," she said. "Beren drinks and gambles, strikin' me as the type to value coin—not chaos. If he was involved in the robbery, he wasn't gettin' the powder for himself. He was in league with someone else. Probably someone in Esgaroth, otherwise they could have gotten it here."

 "None of which can be proven?" Thorin guessed.

 "None, Sire."

 The king sighed. "This should not have happened."

 Kíli tried to appease him. "This could not have been foreseen. Beren is greedier and more hot-tempered than most dwarves I know, and certainly the worst of the warmasters."

 "Where there is one, more will always follow," Thorin said, downcast.

 "You have fifty thousand active troops on the mountain. This is the first major incident in thirty years. Logically—"

 Thorin brow creased in aggravation. "I have a traitor in my ranks, and you speak to me of logic?"

 "I know, Uncle," Kíli amended. "Treason is never reasonable, but you mustn't fear this as part of something bigger. I even think Beren in his twisted mind is still loyal to you—"

 Thorin threw him an unconvincing glare.

 Kíli raised an accepting hand, explaining, "Though not what we would call loyalty, obviously, and he will always be loyal to himself and his pocketbook first."

 "That I believe," Thorin said.

 Kíli went on. "My captains are hearing his closest officers and his family, as we speak, to see if we can shed some light on the event and track his movements on the night in question."

 Thorin nodded in approval.

 "We'll get to the bottom of this, Uncle," Kíli said.

 "Very well."

 With those words, they were excused. But when Kíli moved to the door, Hemery waved her hand discretely, gesturing for him to go on without her. He gave her an uncomfortable grimace, looking between her and Thorin.

 Then Kíli narrowed his eyes at her, strangely suspicious. Had not the king been in a foul mood to begin with, perhaps Kíli would have jested about the two of them being alone together, but he knew better.

 "I'll wait outside," he said unhurriedly, as if to let the message sink in properly. "Just there." He pointed to the door with his thumb as he walked backwards towards it. On the threshold, he pointed to the floor behind him, silently repeating himself.
Hem frowned at him like he was a wasteland mentally. Did Kíli think they suddenly needed a chaperone? She resisted the urge to snort at him. How could a prince, a commander of legions, act with such sound judgement one moment and with such pettiness the next?

When the door finally closed behind him, she turned back to Thorin, walking up to lean on his desk.

"You do know that Kíli's right?" she said, more statement than question, though it smarted to admit that Kíli was right about anything so soon after his antics. "You have no reason to believe others would share Beren's flexible view on duty and loyalty."

"I know." But he did not meet her eyes.

"And you should definitely not blame yourself," she said, tilting her head forward and looking at him pointedly.

He returned the look, clearly still not convinced.

"It may not be my fault originally, but I should have dealt with Beren long before today. I just did not know how." He drummed his fingers on the armrest. "Perhaps this was what I was waiting for—for him to make a proper mistake so I could rid myself of him forever without compromise."

"It would be convenient if that was the case," she admitted. "Just need a confession first. Then you can lock him in the darkest corner of the mountain for as long as you like," she said lightly.

"Erebor's too good for him," Thorin scoffed. "I'll have him crush rocks with his teeth for a hundred years in the Iron Hills."

Hem smiled before she could stop herself and then winced as she actually imagined chewing on gravel. A chill went down her spine.

"That sounds . . ." She nodded as if in agreement with his idea. " . . . truly horrid." She laughed.

Thorin smiled softly. "I am delighted that you approve," he said dryly. Then he rose, coming around the desk to stand next to her. "And despite the circumstances, I am pleased to see you again so soon."

Hemery's insides warmed, from his words and his proximity.

"I am, as well," she said truthfully but self-consciously, forcing herself to keep eye contact.

"Especially after the disquieting report I received this morning," Thorin said, his eyes turning sharp like the steel of his sword. He did not say anything else, just let the implication simmer between them.

Damn Wolves, Hem fumed. She had already had an earful from her guards yesterday. Now, to hear them from him as well? She was not in the mood.

She began turning away, but he caught her wrist, keeping her close. She was prepared for a lecture; however, she was not prepared for his concerned, insistent gaze.

"What happened?" he asked in a low rumble.

She met his eyes, hesitant. He would be more upset over what happened while she escaped her guards rather than her act of escaping.
"They said you were wet and freezing when you returned," he pushed, squeezing her hand tighter.

"I was in a hurry," Hem said, trying to explain without lying or upsetting him. "Got careless, I guess, and I took a spill." She shrugged.

"You fell into the canal by accident?" He did not believe that for one heartbeat.

If she persisted, perhaps he would let it go, eventually. No one but her and Lida knew the truth, after all. Grudgingly, she admitted that if the roles were ever reversed, she would want him to tell her the truth.

"I went to talk to the bookkeeper's wife. I chose to not bring the guards," Hem began. "Perhaps it was a mistake, or perhaps it wouldn't have made a difference. But I got what I came for, and I wanted to quickly relay the information to Bain and Kíli."

Hem paused, searching for the words. The feeling of his warm hand still on hers was actually comforting rather than restricting; its presence spoke of acceptance and trust. Regardless of what she had to say, he would listen and still hold it when she was done. He may not like what he heard, but he would stay.

"I only brought Lida with me—a dwarf whom I met in Lake Town—to help me find the way. I think my worry might have urged her to take a dangerous shortcut."

"Aye, I have heard of her. The thief," Thorin muttered. His tone suggested that would be a whole other point of discussion. "Danger is to be expected."

"She got me back, safe and sound," Hem countered. "Not without risk to herself, by the way. The Ashes is not a hospitable place, full of unfriendly people who don't want you there, and when you try to leave, they don't let you. And I'm sure the tour would have been just as excitin' with my own guards. Perhaps our numbers and fancy outfits would have made things worse—I don't know. I won't speculate in what would or wouldn't have happened. So there."

He still looked at her gravely. "This is precisely what I feared. You have only been there a week. Who knows what could happen next?"

"A week and a half," she corrected childishly but continued quickly at his grave face. "And I've already promised Vannur I won't go off on my own again," Hem tried to compromise.

"Hem," he said emphatically, pulling on her hand and making her close the half step left between them. "You are not safe down there. You put yourself in danger in every move—with or without guards."

"It won't be long now. After this mess with the treasury is cleared up, I'll come home. Bain said as much yesterday."

Thorin eyebrows rose. "So he has some sense, after all?"

"Don't," she admonished, stifling a smile. "He said our contract was done after the robbery gets sorted."

"Careful with those promises. Better make none unless you are certain."

Hemery met his eyes for so long that she dared not speak. No, she thought, she could not make any promises of number of days or levels of safety. But the way he was looking at her, patient and open, she wanted to. She would have said anything to make him happy.
"No, you're right," she said finally, taking a deep breath.

Thorin kept looking at her the way he sometimes had before, as if he wanted her to say something else. But she never knew what.

"Just promise me you will," he suddenly said, "come back." The words seemed thick in his mouth.

A cord tightened around her heart and lungs.

"Of course I will."

Unthinking, her free hand shot up, but she stopped herself before she touched his shoulder. As soon as sense called to her, she attempted to draw back, but he caught her hand in his, enveloping it like the other and brought them both to his chest.

His eyes were not kind anymore. His face bore a fierce scowl, as if concentration or vexation grated on his mind.

"Because you wish it?" he asked.

The question surprised her. "What? Yeah, 'course I do."

Of course she wanted to come back. But her answer did not seem to be compelling.

"You will not long for the open sky and the world beyond? Other cities, other lands?"

"No," she replied, frowning. "Why do ask?"

"If you are to truly pledge yourself to me, I need you to be certain that you do not seek out trouble and adventure to fill some void in an otherwise dreary existence. In all the time I have known you, you have never been satisfied with your place, always moving on, always involved in some spectacle. Restless, fearless. I have no desire to lock you in anymore than you wish to be caged."

Hemery had always thought trouble found her, not the other way around. But hearing his words and seeing how it bothered him, she understood why he would see it that way. Many of her adventures, as he put it, were her own choices. And sometime soon, she would have to refuse trouble instead of inviting it.

"Thorin," she began. Just that was enough to see his shoulders relax somewhat. "Erebor will never be my cage. I have the best view of the world from this peak. I want to stay here. I do."

"Then why tempt fate? These are unnecessary risks you're taking."

"I don't—"

"You do. It is a plain disregard for your life and for those close to you who also hurt when you hurt. Why risk it?"

She wanted to contradict him, a deep-seated need to justify her actions. But in the end, she realised it was only that—justification and entitlement. Nothing in Esgaroth was worth risking her life for. Nothing in Blackwater either, for that matter. But she felt that need, that petulant righteousness, that chafing urge to solve every mystery, uncover every secret because if she did, maybe the chafing would stop, maybe her nightmares would stop. If only she could stop feeding that need.

But it was always hungry.
"I don't—I don't know," she said truthfully, feeling her eyes prickle. Thorin seemed to realise it as well.

He sighed, holding her hands tight.

"Just do not sacrifice yourself in the search for something you cannot even name. Come back to me."

He turned up her left hand and pressed his lips to the thin skin of her palm, and then he did the same to the right. With his hands resting on her wrists, her hands stayed near his bearded chin, almost cradling his face.

Carefully, she dared graze his determined jaw with her fingers. He did not pull away; his steely eyes only drew her further into him. Slowly, she leaned in, to be nearer, to breathe him in, to kiss his skin or his lips—she did not know which she preferred at the moment. Her mouth found its way to his, first lightly on the left side, then resettled more firmly in the middle when she felt his lips move against hers. Any fear that she might be rejected died when she felt his thumbs caress the inside of her wrists were he still held them.

The kiss was achingly familiar to their brief contact in the stable at Blackwater but still wholly different. Where the first had been desperate and harsh, this was soft and hesitant. Too hesitant. She wanted there to be no doubt between them that she wanted this.

Hem's fingers closed around the fur collar of his coat and pulled him tighter to her, pressing her mouth more insistently to his. With a rush of breath, Thorin finally let go of her hands and caught her up in his powerful arms, spinning her around with her back to his desk. The stone dug into her thighs before his hands settled on her waist, lifting her up to sit on top. She opened her mouth, inviting him in, allowing him to trace her lips with his tongue before meeting hers in bold strokes.

Thorin hummed into her mouth, a vibration travelling from the depth of his chest to hers. A wordless communication of approval and pleasure that she answered with a whispered sigh—all she could manage through her scattered thoughts.

His arms embraced her, one around her waist, the other steadied her head, hand in her hair, as he leaned into her, over her, until she propped herself up with an elbow on the stone. Her knees came slightly apart as one of his legs pushed between them in their awkward position. Not that she minded. It was still not close enough.

Hemery squeezed her legs closed, locking him between her thighs. In the next instance, Thorin moved from her mouth to kiss the skin under her chin, her throat, and her neck as far as her high collar would allow. His beard rasped her tender flesh, but she did not care. His teeth scraped more, but she enjoyed it. It made the soft touches of his lips and tongue all the more sweet. She enjoyed every moment—how his delight was as fierce as his temper, how his weight pressed down upon her whole body, how her shoulder burned from holding herself up by clutching his shoulder.

One arm held her waist in an iron grip, keeping her core to his. The other moved to her skirt, inching the hem of her dress up over her knee until a searing palm folded around her calf. One shameless, smooth movement brought it higher, sneaking underneath the edge of her underclothes, and settling on the back of her thigh. The rough pads of his fingers brushed over the fine hairs there, seemingly driving Hem to lose her senses on purpose—with impropriety as well as shivers of desire.

There was a knock on the door. Hemery froze in the rude awakening from this indulgence, a sharp reminder of the outside world. Thorin's mouth stilled, but his breath was hot on her neck, his parted
lips still glued to her skin.

"King Thorin," Rál—one of Thorin's guards—said through the door. "The council waits."

Thorin came to rest his forehead against Hem's temple, his eyes closed, gathering his breath.

"Damned fool," he growled.

Hemery was not sure who he meant—Rál, her, or himself?
The hand on Hemery’s thigh slowly released her, stroking softly down to her knee and then let down her skirts.

Cold air rushed over her when Thorin moved away. Suddenly embarrassed in her half-lying position, she sat up and slid down, putting her feet on the floor. Still light headed, she smoothed out her dress.

Hem took a deep breath. What would have happened if they had not been interrupted? She was very drawn to Thorin, her body called to him as well as her heart. But how far was she willing to go before they were wed? It had not bothered her before when she let that boy—she refused to call him a man—have her in Tirith; back then, she had a hope that maybe love could be freely given without preconditions, like Hanah and Fíli. That had turned out to be merely a dream, and she imagined herself wiser now.

However, she and Thorin were engaged. She had wanted to kiss him ever since Blackwater—even before Blackwater if she was perfectly honest. She was not prepared for the flood that rendered her feverish and wanton when their skin met. When he was close, she discarded common sense and propriety willingly. She imagined herself wise, and she imagined she would have stopped it before it went too far. But maybe . . .

Not until she felt hands at her hair did she look at Thorin, but his eyes were focused on the knot at the back of her head. Noticing her eyes on him, he paused.

"May I?" he asked, politely. As if he had not just had his fingers buried in her hair, turning it into the mess it now surely was.

"Mm-hm," she managed in affirmation. Goosebumps rose at her scalp when she felt his hands working.

He undid the knot painlessly, quickly weaved a simple braid down the side of her neck, and fastened it with a clasp from his pocket.

"There," he settled, draping the braid forward over her shoulder. "Now you are presentable."

The decorated metal clasp was convex, as wide as her thumb, and hooked into the braided tresses and held them together inside an adjustable ring. In the middle of the plate was a dark, red stone. It rested heavy against her breast.

"Thank you," she said in a low voice. A shy smile tugged at her mouth. Finally, he succeeded to get rid of her hair knot that had bothered him almost a year.

"I must leave you," Thorin said in his usual graveness once more.

"I understand."

The king did not have enough hours in the day.

With one last steel-grey gaze, sharp and heated enough to gut her and boil her innards, he left her
there in his study. As if breaking the surface after a deep dive, Hemery drew lungfuls of air, feeling her heart work forcefully in her chest.

She looked down at her hands, noticing red crescents in her palms left by her nails from yesterday. She traced the strange wounds with a fingertip. She wondered if Thorin had seen them. He must have when he kissed them earlier.

"Hem?"

She spun around in fright, palms over her heart.

Kíli was at the door.

Right—of course. He said he would wait for her. She breathed out in relief.

"What are you doing in here all by yourself?" he asked.

She cleared her throat, not trusting her voice at the moment.

"Nothin'." She joined him in the corridor. He fell into step with her, heading for the dining room.

After a while of Kíli not speaking, which struck her as unusual, she glanced at him only to find him already watching her.

"What?" she asked dumbly.

"Nice hair," was all he said, pursing his lips and nodding at the clasp.

"Thorin gave it to me," she explained.

"Just making an observation," he said, focusing his eyes dead ahead, smirking. "I don't want to know what happened in there."

Hemery's cheeks heated, but he did not bring it up again for the rest of the day.

After eating, Hemery went to find her sister to calm her nerves. Hanah was happy to see her again so soon and did not mind spending the afternoon together. When it was time for tea, they went to see Dis together with Híli. They ended up staying in Dis's workshop, chatting mostly and working very little. Hem had nothing better to do than try to relax and wait for word from Kíli on Beren.

Hemery was playing with Híli on the floor when the child asked, "Will you stay this time?"

Hem was lying down on her back, holding Híli's hands and balancing her body on the soles of Hem's feet, having Híli pretend she was a flying bird.

The question tore at Hem's heart.

"Did your ma tell you to ask that?" she said, trying to jest, ignoring the pang.

"I did no such thing," Hanah said from the workbench where she sewed beads on a bracelet.

"Answer the girl."

Hem let the bird land on her own feet and sat up. "Not this time, love," she said. She held onto Híli's hands. "But it won't be long now."
"How long?" Híli insisted.

"No more than three weeks. Bain promised."

"Does he tell you what to do?"

The innocent question raised discomfort in Hem. She was not sure why.

"Well, I work for him," Hem began. She swung their joined hands back and forth a bit, as if to lighten the conversation. "So yes, I suppose so. But I do not bow to him like I do for you and for your grandmother." She threw a smile to Dis for good measure.

Dis glanced up from her seat next to Hanah, as if she was not really listening to the conversation, but her smirk gave her away.

"But Amad and Sigin'amad doesn't have anyone telling them what to do. Why do you?"

Hem laughed. She had to admit the child made a good argument. But Hem would not go so far as to say Hanah and Dis did not have anyone to answer to.

"That's . . . different. I guess I haven't found my place yet."

"Your place is here, isn't it?"

Hem brushed her thumbs over Híli's knuckles, assuring. "Yes, you're right, of course. All will be better when I return."

"Will someone tell me what to do when I grow up?"

"No," Hem replied vehemently. She had not meant to sound so dire, but she did not want Híli to ever believe that she needed to heed others' orders. Besides, she was a princess; there was really no need for her to worry about it.

"You will always know what to do if you're honest with yourself, in your heart."

"Hopefully," Hanah interjected, "no one will ever want you to do somethin' you object to." She probably thought Hem's words were too fanciful.

"It doesn't hurt to have trusted advisors at your side, helping you to make those decisions," Dis added, pragmatically, like a true princess—an experienced princess.

Hem nodded sagely at them both. "Of course. Very wise." Then she leaned in close to Híli. "You should only listen to the people you care about," she whispered, conspiratorially.

Híli giggled.

"What happens in three weeks?" she asked, bouncing up and down and shaking their still joined hands.

Hemery and Thorin would marry. She had promised him. And after that, she would not continue working for Bain. She had promised. These two facts were the only certainties in her foreseeable future.

"There will be a weddin' ceremony," Hem told her coyly, as if telling a secret.

Híli grinned. She knew exactly what Hem meant.
"What will it be like?"

"Oh, nothin' special." Hem curved her lip in affected disappointment, playing it down, much to Hlí's amusement. "Grown-up, borin' people. Grown-up, borin' talk. Maybe some food if we're lucky—I dunno." She shrugged.

"No, no, no," Hlí chanted, laughing and bouncing even more. "That's not the way."

"No?" Hem feigned shock. "What then? You who seem to know everythin', tell us." She shook their hands.

"It's more than that," Hlí said as if Hem did not know anything. "It's lots of people and food and music and singing and dancing. It's like a birthday—only better because you get a husband as a present."

Hem and Hanah laughed at that. Dis merely shook her head at her granddaughter's reasoning.

"That sounds lovely," Hanah said. "Might have a proper think about this marriage thing."

Dis chuckled as she elbowed Hanah playfully in the side.

"But it's not just a wedding ceremony," Dis said, growing serious. "It's the wedding ceremony."

Hlí watched her as if she was about to do a magic trick. Hem looked at Dis a bit more serious, feeling almost like a child herself sitting on the floor of Dis's workshop.

"It's King Thorin's wedding. There hasn't been anything like it hosted in Erebor for over two hundred years. It will be the greatest feast in a decade, only transcended by the birth of a Durin."

"Was there a feast when I was born?" Hlí asked, wide eyed.

"There was dancing all night, and fireworks lit up the sky in every colour you can imagine," Dis said, bewitching the child with her words.

"Did you dance?" Hlí asked Hem.

"With those crazy dwarves?" Hem exclaimed. "No disrespect, but dwarves go mental when it comes to drinkin', eatin', and dancin'—preferably all at the same time. I was only a bairn myself. I was there for the food, after that, I kept to my room. Your ma just had you crawlin' out of her body, so she was sleepin'."

"And I was tending to you," Dis added with a gentle smile, "wee, hairless, red faced, trembling pup that you were. And teaching your adad how to handle you properly."

Hlí laughed, jumping from foot to foot, as if dancing while holding on to Hem's hands.

"I'll dance all night, all night, all night," she sang.

Sethie came in after a swift knock on the door. Taking in the scene before her, she cracked a smile.

"You can dance down to Dwalin's hut," she said. "Let's go. It's time for training."

At suppertime, there was still no news.

Thorin joined the rest of his family for the evening meal, like he did last time Hemery was home.
Her heart beat harder just being in the same room as him. But when she dared look at him, his eyes held none of the hot steel from before—as if nothing had happened between them only hours ago. This confused Hem, but at the same time, she was glad he behaved as usual—moody and taciturn as he was—so as not to embarrass her in front of their families.

Híli sat close to Hemery, even in her lap until dinner was served when Hanah forced her to sit on her own chair.

After the meal was done, Thorin followed Dis to her parlour where Hem and Hanah usually joined her for talks and sometimes a stronger drink before bedtime when they had no work to finish.

Thorin rarely joined the rest of the family for supper, let alone for evening company; and Hemery was ready to bet a pretty penny that Fíli and Kíli only joined them on this particular night out of curiosity about Thorin's unusual choice. Also because they would all be gathered in one place if there was any word given about Beren.

Híli sat down at a smaller table where she had began to solve a big puzzle game a few days before. Fíli sat next to Hanah who was carving patterns into bone beads with a blade the size of a large needle. Kíli sat with a small notebook in which he now and then jotted something down. And Dis simply sat back with a drink in her lap—to enjoy the calm, Hemery guessed.

Hem was about to sit down herself when Thorin's voice sounded close at her back.

"Come sit with me by the fire," he requested. "If you please," he added politely, motioning to a seat.

Two chairs stood a few feet in front of the fireplace. Between them, a board game was set up.

Hemery was not fond of board games—too many ways to go, too many pieces and variables, and too long rounds. And too much competitiveness; she had enough of that in her training with Dwalin. Like Híli, she preferred puzzles. But she nodded in agreement.

They sat down, and she noticed he lowered himself rather slowly into his seat. She suspected he still suffered from his injuries but said nothing.

Thorin swept his hand toward her, palm up, signaling her to start at will.

Hem moved the piece in the middle of the board, caring little for strategy this early in the game. It was only a means to pass the time, after all. And a way to spend time together without discussing the events of the afternoon.

Thorin took surprisingly long time in his turn, waiting to make his move until Hem raised her eyebrows at him expectantly. She feared he regarded games too seriously, which would perhaps cause her to regret engaging him in one.

Híli abandoned her puzzle to come stand next to Thorin's chair, watching their slow game. After a moment of silence, the king let out a breath and settled back in his seat.

"So?" he said to the child. "What do you think?" He pointed to the board.
Híli took the question seriously, observing the pieces with tense lips, stopping herself from narrating her thoughts. But Hem could see how her fingertips danced together lightly, as if counting steps and moves. Then an impish smile made its way onto Híli's face.

"I think Hemmy's in trouble," she replied at last but did not explain how so as not to spoil the game.

"You what?" Hemery frowned at the board. She could see no obvious threat, but then again, it would be an understatement to claim she had never excelled at this kind of game.

"What plan of action do you suggest?" Thorin asked his advisor. Híli leaned in to whisper something in his ear. Thorin listened with a frown of concentration and nodded. "Very good."

Confidently, he reached over and moved one of his players to the opposite side of the main pieces, which made no sense to Hemery.

"Hold up," she said. "What are you doin'?"

"Strategising," Thorin said. "Not to be divulged to the opposition, I'm afraid."

"But it's two against one. That's not fair."

"What is unfair?" Thorin asked innocently. "It is not against the rules to invite conspirators, is it?" he asked Híli.

She shook her head, equally saint-like. "No."

"In that case," Hem said, feeling her competitiveness rise. She looked around the room for the best option. Seeing Fíli in close conversation with Hanah, she called out to him. "Fee, get over here."

Confused, he looked up, his attention broken. "Pardon?"

"You must save me from your family. They're playin' dirty."

Kíli looked up at that. "What about me? I'm the best cheat there is."

"I don't want to cheat," Hem protested. "I want to win."

Kíli shrugged. "Same thing."

"Fíli is better at this game than you."

"Remember you said that," Kíli said ominously before going back to his work.

Hanah smiled and nodded to allow Fíli to leave her. "Go on."

With an affected sigh, he came over to the fireplace and sat on his haunches to view the board.

"Hmm." Fíli acted as cunning as his daughter and his uncle but added an air of mystery by brushing the braids of his moustache at the same time. "I see."

"See what?" Hem asked, intrigued.

With a smirk, Fíli leaned toward her and spoke in hushed tones. "It's a decoy. They're trying to distract you, scattering your pieces and leaving them vulnerable."

Finally smiling herself, Hem drawled her own, "Hmm, I see."
The game progressed thusly—Híli pointing at pieces, Thorin moving them, and Fíli advising Hem who tried to keep a strong position. Híli was having a lot of fun, giggling when Hem made a poor move. Thorin had to hush her, both to keep her from giving up their strategy and to stop her from being rude. In the end, however, Thorin led Hem on a wild goose chase around the board, forcing her to defend her pieces rather than attacking his, resulting in his win.

"Better luck next time." Fíli shrugged, slapping a hand on Hem's shoulder.

"Luck?" Hem scoffed. "You were supposed to help me," she complained, not at all appreciating his carefree manner.

"What can I say? I'm good, but they're better. If I could beat the king at a simple game of stone pieces on a wooden board, I'd be very much alarmed." Though he seemed very happy to return to his seat next to Hanah, refusing to share Hem's humiliation.

"I don't like this game," Hem said, beginning to clear away the pieces methodically.

Thorin sported a modest smile, and Híli had the decency to not show the glee she surely felt. Hemery hoped they would not rub their win in her face; just the thought made her jaw clench.

"Híli, would you be so kind as to remove the board, 'Abnith?" Thorin requested.

Híli obliged with only a small a sigh, knowing this was the end of the night for her. Hanah would soon take her to bed.

"Fortunately, you have other qualities," Thorin told Hemery. Was it starting already?

"And even more fortunately, none of my work requires me to play board games," she countered. "Be careful to not spoil such a nice evenin' with boastin'. Who should respect a king who brags about winnin' children's games?" She smiled and shook her head questioning.

"I am certainly not boasting. I am merely amused that you were bested by a nine year old," he said, eyebrows hitched above laughing eyes.

"Well . . ." she attempted to find an argument. "It's a game—it's supposed to be fun, but somehow you manage to make that into a battle of wills, as well."

Thorin laughed.

"Very well, you may acquire Híli's aid next time," he said, as if to placate her.

"Assumin' I'll ever wish to play you again."

"I will have a very long time at my disposal to persuade you, if nothing else," he said, some steel slipping back into his eyes, equal parts danger and warmth.

A thrill went through her at the reminder.

"Indeed," she said in muttered agreement.

Even if their marriage was only designed by convenience, even if she was apprehensive about offering her body to him before they were wed, and even if she did not know whether he felt as deeply for her as she did for him—she knew that after he became her husband, she would also have a very long time at her disposal to share his bed as intimately as she wished and to find out exactly how shallow or deep his affection for her ran.
The next morning, Hemery awoke from dreams of serpents and dark waters to Raín gently shaking her shoulder. A startled breath escaped her before she recognised her night guard in the weak light from the lantern in Raín's hand, and she fell back against her pillows with a hand to her throat, making sure nothing hindered her airways, from without and within, as she drew long breaths.

"The king calls, Miss," Raín said softly, as if regular speaking would be too harsh in the darkness. It would be, Hem thought, and she was grateful to Raín for her consideration.

Blinking awake, Hem looked through the open door behind Raín where no sunlight broke the shadows. It was not yet dawn.

"Oh, gods," she sighed, rubbing her eyes.

"You're wanted in the dungeons."

That made the last of sleep flee her mind.

Beren. Kíli must have made progress with him.

She sat up in her nightdress.

"I'll—I'll be right down. I'll just dress."

When she had her dress, shoes, and coat on, she thought about braiding her hair. But she was not as good at it as Thorin, and it would take too long for her inexperienced hands to attach the clasp, so she settled for twisting her hair into a simple bun with a few pins through it.

When she exited her bedroom, Raín handed her a mug of ginger tea from Hem's own teakettle by the fireplace. Night watches were long and dull, and the corridors on the third floor were cold, so Raín was welcome to Hemery's study were she could sit, tend to her weapons, read, or have some tea if she wanted to.

"Thank you." Hem took the tea in hand as they left. "Did he say anythin' else?" Hem asked when they descended the great stairs.

"Nothing, Miss."

Hem's stomach fluttered nervously as they continued.

"If you don't mind," Raín began. "What did he do?"

"Beren?"

"Aye. The whole mountain's whisperin' about it. Some say he had someone slain—"

"Slain?" Hem hissed in surprise. "No, only some rather shady business deals. At best, immoral—otherwise treasonous. But don't speak of it to anyone, please."

Honourable Raín almost looked offended at the thought that she might gossip about it. "I would never, Miss."

Hem nodded approvingly, smiling. "I didn't think so." She enjoyed the warm tea as the air around them grew colder in the lower levels.

"If I may," Raín said again, hesitantly.
"Go on," Hem said, intrigued to hear what she had to say. Raín spoke so rarely; Hem could not fathom what would urge her to speak unbidden twice in one night.

"Mind you, M'lady—Miss Hemery, I've been posted with you less than a year, and most of my information come from the day guard, and even then, it is fragmented summaries. I like the quiet and the empty nights. I don't like the criers and the tittle-tattle of the taverns, though one cannot escape them, I reckon." She paused in her speech uncomfortably, keeping alert, looking out for movement around them. "I feel, however, that if you think the warmaster performed anything less than his fundamental duty in this mountain, then he deserves to sit where he's at."

Raín clenched her jaws, still not looking at Hemery, as if overcome by some emotion. Her honesty genuinely moved Hem.

"And though I don't particularly like change, I must say it's about time we had a queen. Bless Lady Dis, she does fine work for all of us, and honour will forever be hers for bringin' those boys up right in spite of everything—"

Hem was not sure what Raín meant by that. She guessed Dis would have had it rough after their father's death and then their insistence on accompanying Thorin on his suicidal quest to reclaim Erebor. Yes, Dis deserved all their respect.

"But she's not queen and will never have that kind of power. It's time we had more than old kings and princes on the thrones, even if you are mankind, Miss. That's all I'll say on the matter."

"That's all?" Hem said, thinking it was quite a strong opinion for someone who hardly knew her, for good as well as bad.

"Aye." Raín nodded resolutely. "That's all I'll say."

Hem smiled. Raín was a dwarf of few words, but when she spoke, she made sure it counted—the kind of dwarf Hem liked. After tonight, she would probably never mention Hemery's heritage or position ever again. She had said what she wanted to say.

Hemery and Raín met Thorin and Steig on the platform where the stairs turned to break into several smaller ones. One of them led down to the dungeons, but Thorin chose another.

"This way," he said motioning further down in the opposite direction of the cells.

"Where are we goin'?"

"I need to show you something," he simply said.

Wary, Hem followed. Something must have happened for him to bother her in the middle of the night. The first time he did something like this, he was angry with her. The second time, he brought her to Blackwater. And the third time, he made her an offer she could not refuse.

They moved down past the forges where molten stone glowed like lava in giant tubs. Even in the night, dwarves were on duty, tending the furnaces. The orange light brought images to Hem's mind of the underworld where demons dwelled. The very ground exuded heat, seeping through her soft shoes. But they ventured deeper still.

They moved past mining tunnels, some narrow, some big as halls, and some seemingly untouched by chisels or pickaxes. Thorin chose one of the latter, entering a space frozen in time—a natural cave with thin pillars reaching between floor and ceiling and a slim tunnel leading into a darkness so thick, Hem was afraid of entering. But Thorin went inside, so she followed.
Hearing his footsteps in front of her, she slowly made her way through the tunnel until the light from the guards' lanterns in the mining shaft no longer reached them. After a moment, Hem heard the tunnel open up into a greater space—sounds of drops of water hitting stone or puddles echoed around her, some close, some far. Perhaps an underground lake even, she thought.

Where were they going? Was this a hidden passage to secret cells where they had moved Beren? Or was this the way to Beren's hideout where he stored other goods he had stolen? Perhaps a path leading out of the mountain, a path for clandestine purposes, for thieves and spies? Hemery's mind spun, each guess as wild as the next. The darkness was playing tricks on her. She was no dwarf—she could not find her bearings down here like Thorin could. She absently twirled the ring on her finger.

"What is this place?" Hem whispered, but her words travelled to a far wall somewhere in front of her and returned, distorted and foreign.

Suddenly, Thorin stopped.

"Can you see anything?" he asked softly.

"No, it's pitch black. I can't see my feet or the way back—"

"Shhh," Thorin hushed her, reached out for her hand, and squeezed it, soothingly. "Wait a moment."

Hem had long suspected dwarves could see better in the dark than men. Could he see her at this moment when she could not see him? Was he looking at her now?

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, trying to calm down, trying to do as he said.

Was that a breeze she felt on her face? A soft, cool wind with freshwater scent.

Hem's eyes opened. Was it an illusion, the glinting she saw up ahead? A shimmer, like a thousand small lanterns through fog. She blinked again, trying to focus. No, there was definitely something there. Like stars in the sky. Where they outside? Surely not.

After a while, she could see the walls of the cave around them, the pillars stretching like icicles to the ceiling, the wet, white limestone covering everything in ripples—the dripping water slowly coating everything. In front of them lay a small pond, or maybe a spring. Hem could not tell its depth. But above them, crystals sprinkled the stone, weaving through the walls like threads in a tapestry, like rivers bursting forth over falls and rocks, or like fireworks frozen in motion. The jewels shone brighter as Hem's eyes adjusted to the low light until they covered the entire ceiling and bled down the walls in shifting rainbow colours.

Hem gasped in amazement. Unthinking, she squeezed Thorin's hand back.

"What are those? Hemery whispered lower than before, almost without voice.

"Tanuz kheled. Caterpillars of the mire moth," he replied. "They feed of the algae and moss in the tunnels and then they fly back out through small cracks in the rock onto the eastern plains. They are also called amakhuh id-nâla—pathfinders. When one finds them, one also finds water and a way out of the mountain."

"Incredible," Hem breathed.

"When the dragon lived, the plains were charred and dead, but slowly, life has begun to return. The
earth is recovering. Trees are growing on the hills and the mires have birds and toads once again."

"And we have moths in our cellars," Hem said through a grin though he could not see it.

She felt Thorin's thumb caress her hand where he still held it. She tried to see him in the dark. She thought she saw his eyes glint, but was not sure.

"Behold," he said.

Hem looked around her trying to understand what he meant, when suddenly the cave lit up like a campfire slowly gaining brightness. It was the worms. They shun stronger and stronger until they hung like clustered stars in a low sky, and Hem could see her hand in front of her as clearly as under a full moon.

"The sun rises," Thorin explained. Hem saw his arm as it pointed to the far wall. "The light is reflected through all the tanuz in the cracks and channels from the outside to here, spreading as if by mirrors.

Hemery's smile spread with it, unable to be tempered. She was witnessing a true wonder.

They both stood a long moment silently regarding the curious creatures moving like waves on a quiet lake over the walls.

"Why have you shown me this?" Hem asked, still smiling.

"Not everything that shines is gold, and not every treasure can be hoarded. So many hours—days and years—we spend trying to maintain the peace and comfort of all in the mountain. Sometimes I like to remind myself why it is worth the toil."

His hand was warm around hers in the cold cave.

"You should see all the mountain has to offer, not just the traitors and the scum."

"I'm sure I could live a lifetime here and still not know all its secrets."

"Hopefully, you will live your lifetime here, but you should still strive to learn them."

Anticipation filled her.

"I will. Thank you for bringin' me here."

After a moment longer, he suddenly said, "Beren has decided to talk."

"What?" Hem exclaimed, her echo startling even herself in the dead silence. "When?"

"Around midnight," he said, dismissively.

"Last night? Why didn't anyone tell me?"

"I wished to sleep a few hours before we got started."

"We need to get started right now," she said, tearing her hand free and turning to go back.

"There's no haste."

She paused, looking back at him.
"A few hours more in his cell won't hurt," Thorin added. "Let him fret a while yet. It will loosen his tongue, mark my words."

Hem bit her lip. He was probably right, but she was eager to return to Esgaroth with whatever knowledge he would bestow on them and put this matter to rest before anyone else got hurt.

"Let us eat," he said. "Kíli will join us upstairs, and in an hour or so, we will take Beren apart—piece by duplicitous piece."

Hemery and Kíli entered the cell, the door fell closed behind them with hissing hinges and a bang, and the lock was turned with a metallic rustle. It was cold and gloomy. There was no bench, not even a mouldy mattress or a blanket on the stone floor.

Beren sat with his back to the wall, hands resting on his bent knees, but when he saw Kíli, he got up. Hem heard the chains that fettered his wrists and ankles. In the torchlight filtering in from the corridor through the small, barred window, she could make out bruising on his face and dried blood in his beard. Judging by the smell, old spirits were escaping through his very skin, the way it did on people who drank heavily every day. If that was the case, he would be feeling pretty poorly right now. He looked like he had been in the dungeons for weeks, not days.

Hemery disliked the way Erebor treated prisoners, especially when they were yet to be sentenced for a crime. But this was not the time to raise the issue with Kíli—the chief of security—as he was about to interrogate Beren.

Kíli broke the oppressive silence.

"I know you were here, in Erebor, these past three nights," he said. "Two of those nights you've spent here."

Kíli looked around as if surveying an unimpressive residence.

"The third you spent at a tavern on the lower levels until the wee hours of the morning when you had to be dismissed by the guards for belligerence—plenty of witnesses attest to that. Around the same time, a storage facility in Esgaroth was raided. Now, I know you weren't there, but I have reason to believe you know who did it. Because there's additional testimonies that cover many a night before that when you have been known to travel to Esgaroth, taking part in hazard games and involving yourself with unsavoury characters—some who may have use of the items stolen."

He said all this with an air of calm and assurance, as if it was of little importance.

"I have no knowledge of any raid," Beren said, sounding as if he had eaten gravel. "Any who accuse me of such a detestable act is spreading wretched falsehoods."

"Calm yourself," Kíli said, waving away Beren's wounded pride. "No one is spreading falsehoods of that kind. Certainly not the two men and the two women who actually did commit the robbery, abused Lord Bain's guards, and got away with enough black powder to level Lake Town with the water's surface. Certainly not them," he said nonchalantly, glancing at Hem like she agreed with him.

Hemery, on the other hand, just stared blankly at Beren, waiting for him to betray himself with a gesture or a word.

Kíli went on. "Certainly not the bookkeeper who was forced to let them into the storage. And certainly not King Thorin . . ."
Kíli stepped closer to Beren, speaking low and precise. "The king would not believe one of his own warmasters, his trusted captain, to be involved in such a heinous plot. Can you imagine the betrayal he would conceive it to be? Can you imagine the punishment a traitor like that would suffer?"

Beren's eyes were wide now, of fear or sincerity, Hem could not tell.

"But you don't have to worry about that, do you?" Kíli said, menace in his cold friendliness. "Because none of those people could possibly connect you to the crime, surely?" He slapped Beren on the shoulder, but when he noticed how filthy Beren's clothes were, he frowned and wiped his hand on his trousers.

Kíli stepped back, speaking clearer now. "No, we'll probably just wait it out. Lord Bain is sorting it from his end. Soon they'll find who ordered the robbery, and everyone will get their just deserts, or indeed vindication—including you."

After a moment, Beren spoke carefully. "I swear, I have served the king to the best of my ability, and any . . . transgressions I may have committed was never meant to sully his name."

If this was an attempt at honesty, it was a pity his words said one thing and his actions another.

"May have committed?" Hemery asked, incredulous. "Pray tell, what transgressions have you committed that you are prepared to take responsibility for?"

Beren's face turned from white to red beneath his dirty beard. "I do not answer to karhu Siginkann," he growled and tore at his chains threateningly. Hem wondered if he remembered her from ten years ago or if he simply despised all men.

Kíli lunged at him, but Hem grabbed his arm which was raised to strike.

"One mustn't beat prisoners in chains, Prince Kíli," she said respectfully. "However much they may endeavour to deserve it."

Kíli backed away. "Have a care, liwizuthak," he said. "Miss Hemery decides whether you are worthy of bringing your plight to the king, to plead your case to him personally. I do not recommend antagonising her."

Looking at this hateful creature in chains before her, Hem felt hollow detachment. Perhaps it was his being that was truly grey and joyless, or perhaps his drinking had exacerbated some tragedy in his past to turn him into this. But the result was the same.

"I hope you are innocent," she said, plainly. "I really do. Because if you had anythin' to do with that powder bein' stolen, you have no idea what awaits you." She tilted her head at him, peering into his eyes, making sure she had his attention.

"Have you walked every tunnel in this mountain?" she asked rhetorically. "There are so many caves, crevices, and chasms that will never be seen by livin' eyes, some so deep that none know where they lead. Imagine a cell, smaller than this one, one meal a day, pissin' and shittin' right on the floor beneath your feet, and never speakin' to a livin' creature for a hundred years. Complete silence. No forges that hum in the walls, no hammers that chime through the halls. No heat, no light. Just darkness."

Beren seemed to almost tremble now, unable to meet her eyes.

"That would be torment worse than death—even for a dwarf, no?" she asked, calm and cold. "See, murderers get the axe, and ordinary cells are for petty thieves and violent offenders that sit for a
decade or two. But traitors that provide criminals with explosives of such power can never be trusted again. And if someone is killed by that powder, you become a murderer too."

"But should you know where the powder is going and to whom," Kíli said, tone light again, "perhaps you'll only be sent as a prison worker to the Iron Hills, crushing rocks, doing some good and seeing other faces, at least."

Beren lowered his head in silence. But he was not claiming his innocence anymore, which was a good sign.

"Tell Thorin to leave him here," Hemery settled. "If he won't talk, one of the others will."

That was a lie. There were no others. They only wanted Beren to believe the robbers were in Bain's custody and that they would be more inclined to help than he was at the moment.

She turned to the door. Kíli pounded on it, and the metallic rustle of a key in the lock was heard.

The door opened, letting in warm light.

"Wait," Beren called gravelly.

Hem and Kíli froze in the doorway, glancing at each other—knowing, hoping.

"I know who did it," he grumbled.

They turned to him. "Who?" Kíli demanded.

"I'll only speak to King Thorin."

"The king's not your advocate—he's your judge," Hem spat. "You won't see him until you tell us everythin' we want to know."

Beren shot arrows at her with dark eyes.

"I'll only speak to my commander," he retorted venomously.

Hemery's hands fisted tightly until her palms stung from her nails pushing into the old wounds, but she did not care.

Beren was guilty; she knew it. Leena and Aksel had told the truth. And now he was playing with them.

Kíli's put an arm across her shoulders and ushered her out and away without another word. Hem went willingly. She did not know what she would have said or done if she stayed in that hole with Beren.

A few hours later, Hemery was fighting sleep in one of the chairs in Thorin's study where she and Kíli waited for Thorin to return from the dungeons. Kíli sometimes stepped out to speak to his captains, but mostly he stayed with her, pacing restlessly.

He had told Thorin not to worry about the trouble with Beren, but Hem could see it affected him almost as much as it did the king. Erebor rarely had these kinds of problems, due to dwarves' loyal nature, so the blow hit them harder when they did. A lightning strike from a clear sky.

The door opened, startling Hem awake.
It was Thorin. He shrugged off his coat and sat heavily by the fire. She noticed that he favoured his left hand; the knuckles on the right one were bruised.

"Well?" Kíli asked, impatient.

"He's rotten," Thorin muttered.

"We knew that already. Anything else?"

Thorin sighed. "He's rotten, but he speaks the truth. He does not dare do otherwise. He knows who committed the robbery, but not his name."

Kíli scoffed, throwing his hands up. "So he's useless to us?"

"Beren does not know his real name, only what he pretentiously calls himself, where they met, and what he and his closest hands look like."

Hemery absently twirled the ring while a buzzing grew in her ears.

"What does he call himself?" she asked.

"The butcher."

Thanks to Dwarrow Scholar for the Khuzdul. I have taken the liberty of using it as I see fit with little regard to linguistic correctness.

sigin'amad: grandmother

'abnith: young gem

tanuz kheled: bugs of + glass

amakhuh + id-nâla: finders of + the path

karhu + Siginkann(impolite): female genital organ of + man

liwizuthak (impolite term for dwarf from the Blue Mountains): coal-miner

Chapter End Notes

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Hemery leant forward with her elbows on her knees, rubbing her face tiredly with a groan.

"You know this character?" Thorin guessed.

"Unfortunately." She glanced up at him. "Remember the rogue types I ran into in Lake Town? They work for the butcher. It's my impression that he is . . . not nice."

"The crime lords are a disease," Kíli huffed. "They've been left to their own devices for too long, and now their hold on the city is that much greater."

Hem bit at her dry lip, distractedly. "I must return at once, before he smells his own rats—if he hasn't already." She got up and headed for the door.

"Kíli," Thorin said. "You will accompany Miss Hemery."

Hem halted. "There's no need. I said I'd be careful."

"It's not just that," he said. "This is now a state matter. Kíli will be my representative and protect Erebor's interests in Esgaroth."

"Aye, Uncle." Kíli nodded in affirmation and left, probably to make preparations to leave.

Hemery lingered, mulling this over a moment. She knew he did not mean to stifle her on purpose. In his place, she would probably do the same, trying to control the situation by any means. Hem just happened to be on the wrong side of this particular dispute.

"I'll try to keep things civil between them in Lake Town, but are you sure you're not sendin' Kíli to bully Bain into handin' over authority in the matter to you?"

"His time is up," Thorin settled tersely. "Clearly, he cannot handle it."

"It's only been a few days. If you give him more time—"

"Kíli is right. Bain allowed the infestation to grow. He's lost control of the city. This incident with the black powder is merely a symptom."

She guessed that what she really had meant was to give her more time. It did not only feel like he was about to strong-arm Bain out of the matter but also her, as well. If Kíli came to meddle, she would not be allowed to work as freely as she had been hitherto.

"It could be suggested," she said carefully, "that would mean I will also be reined in."

"Nothing of the sort," Thorin dismissed, frowning. "If anything, Kíli's presence will aid you. He will support you in all endeavours, more so than any sailor or fisherman down in Lake Town. You know this."

"They are not my endeavours now—they're Bain's," she reminded him.

"All you do is your own undertaking," he maintained. "You should have him wrapped around your
finger by now."

She bristled at that but spoke calmly.

"You make it sound as though I manipulate people."

He raised an eyebrow at her. "You have remarkable skills of persuasion."

"So perhaps you didn't think it all bad I went to work for Bain—if it meant I'd use my skills on him?" she asked.

He was clever. He must have thought about it. She would bring her Ereboorean mind-set with her to Esgaroth, which could only bring good things to Thorin.

"I never wished for you to go anywhere," Thorin protested. The statement made it sound like he was speaking of more than her departure to Esgaroth. "However, as barbaric a state Lake Town is in at the moment, your influence can be nothing but beneficial for Bain's court. Even I can see the reward for us all by extension. I'm not so callous as to deny them a chance to survive, to keep their civility alive. I just wish it was on someone else's expense."

Hemery was glad to learn that Thorin would not let his dislike for Bain hurt Esgaroth, that he still wanted things to work out for its people. Sooner rather than later. And no matter how much they both wished she did not have to fulfil her duty toward Bain, it was in everyone's best interest that she did. And Thorin obviously thought Kíli would help speed things along.

"Kíli will go with you," he insisted. "Think of him as an ally, not an adversary."

Hem nodded. "You must do what you think is best, Sire," she said, resigned, and turned to leave.

"Hem," he called out, roughly as always when he raised his voice.

She stopped by the door.

"Remember your promise."

The butcher was not there. Of course he was not. Why would he be where he was supposed to?

The evening of Hemery's and Kíli's arrival in Esgaroth, Bain had sent guards to the place Beren claimed to have met him once before—a great storage room behind a brewery in the northern part of Esgaroth—but it had been empty. And the house turned out to belong to someone else entirely who claimed to have no knowledge of the butcher or Beren.

In any case, Beren's meeting had taken place weeks ago. By now, the one they called the butcher was in the wind.

"Somebody must know his name," Bain exclaimed, frustrated, glaring at his lieutenants. All night and all next day had been spent trying to track down the butcher. "None of your informants are sympathetic to our cause? None are willing to give up his name or his hiding place?"

"Not that sympathetic, I'm afraid," his captain replied, regretfully.

Kíli spoke up from his seat to the side where he reclined leisurely with his feet crossed at the ankles. "What about your friend, Hem?"

All turned their attention to him.
"She seems like the sort to get around all strata of society without difficulty," he commented.

Hem saw what he was getting at. He wanted her to assign Lida to the task, unleashing her like a bloodhound to sniff out the butcher. Hem did not like that idea. Lida was already one of the butcher's undesirables. It was dangerous.

"Well, yes, but I—"

"Is she familiar with the butcher?" Bain asked.

"Yes, but I believe plenty are aware of his reputation besides her—"

"Has she encountered him personally?"

"I don't know, but she's had . . . altercations with his lackeys. Unpleasant ones."

"We could at least ask her if she knows how to locate any of them," Kíli suggested casually.

Hem regarded him thoughtfully, twirling her ring. She supposed there was no harm in it as long as Lida was not exposed.

"Very well," she said. "I'll talk to her. But she'll not be bait in any scheme," she warned.

Kíli put his hands up in a placating manner but said nothing to refute the notion.

Hem felt bad for even suggesting that Lida should be involved further with anything to do with the butcher. Lida listened quietly as Hemery explained their situation, giving no sign as to being either for or against helping them.

Hemery, Lida, and Kíli sat in Hemery's chamber at The Galley. Well, Hem and Kíli sat; Lida remained standing by the door.

"Again, I don't mean for you to contact any of them. I'm just askin' if you know anythin' that can help us find him?" Hem finished.

Lida seemed full of thought for a moment, gazing out the window, before answering.

"It's true what you say," she said. "He's not out much. I've never met him. Any run-ins I've had with his boys have been in the street or at the back of taverns or shops while the landlord looks away. No one knows him, but all fear him."

Hem remembered other masters who fit that description, and her stomach turned. Lida went on.

"If you're looking for someone to roll on the butcher, I can show you no place where you'll find what you seek," she said through tense jaws, clearly unhappy about it.

"But you must know something," Kíli insisted. "You must know which spots that are more dangerous than others or which territory is his."

"That would cover half the city," Lida replied.

"He's that influential?" Hem asked, baffled. "Why didn't you tell me this when the treasury was robbed?" The butcher's crew could have been included as suspects a lot sooner if she had.

"You didn't ask," Lida said simply. "But, yes, he's been more powerful than Lord Bain for at least
Kíli clapped Hem forcefully on the shoulder. "Well done, Hem," he said with amused sarcasm. "You've managed to find the one thief in the city who doesn't have anything to do with the butcher and is, therefore, not of use."

Hem glared at him, but he just smiled. She turned back to Lida.

"What does he do? What's his main business?"

Hem wanted to get a sense of what kind of network he had—what kind of man they were dealing with.

"Pleasure houses, smuggling, money lending, theft, extortion . . ." Lida shrugged. "I don't know what else."

"That's a good start, though," Hem said. "Bain's people will have to look into the pleasure houses—there's only a handful of those in the city."

"Selling warm bodies is no crime," Kíli reminded her.

"No, but if they pay for the butcher's protection—as he has been known to demand, correct?" She looked for confirmation at Lida who nodded. "Then their books will tell," Hem concluded.

"They'll not appreciate the scrutiny or the insinuation," Kíli said.

"And Bain certainly doesn't appreciate respectable establishments conductin' business with violent criminals," Hem countered chilly. "If they've nothin' to hide, they should have no problem accommodating their lord."

"Who's the totalitarian now? You sound like Uncle on a bad day." He smirked.

She was sure he merely jested, but Hem's fists clenched involuntarily anyway. She cast him a pointed look and took a breath.

"I'm just sayin' that I'm sure they'll understand," she said through her teeth.

Lida interrupted their staring contest.

"Then you'd like this, as well," she said, bringing forth a wrinkled piece of paper.

Hem took it. There were names on it in blotted ink—people, streets, taverns.

"It's what you asked for last time," Lida explained.

Right, the gambling hubs frequented by dwarves. Indeed, this could come in handy.

"Thank you. You may leave now," Hem said. "Oh—before you go . . ."

Remembering she still owed Lida money, she stood and brought out her purse. Stopping by the door, she put fifteen silver coins in Lida's open palm.

Lida's eyes sparkled as she looked up, closing her fist tightly. "Much obliged to you, Miss."

She lowered her chin in a short bow of the head before disappearing.
"Don't do that again," Hemery told Kíli after Lida had gone.

"Do what?"

"Mock her like you did just now."

Kíli lifted his palms in an earnest gesture—earnest but unapologetic.

"She's a thief," he said in way of excuse. "She receives respect when she has earned it."

"She helped me find out about Beren. That must count for somethin'."

Kíli looked unimpressed. "You obviously paid for any generosity she has shown you. Fifteen pieces of silver in exchange for directions? Steep fee if you ask me—"

Hem's eyebrows rose. "I didn't."

"And definitely not deserving of my respect," he added, ignoring her comment.

"When she's a guest in my quarters, bidden to appear by me, I'll decide how she's treated."

Kíli shrugged one shoulder nonchalantly and looked away. "Fine. But I'd like to add that, strictly speaking, I mocked you, not her."

Hem punched him lightly in the shoulder at that. He could easily have avoided it, of course, but instead he cowered like a little boy.

"A-ah! We've talked about this," he complained. "You can't keep hitting me."

"Then stop actin' like a spoiled bloody dwarf prince."

Kíli shook his head indignantly. "I'm sure I don't know what you mean by that."

"C'mon," Hem said while putting on her coat. "Time to put Bain's people to work. That should keep you busy, yeah?"

"Can I order them about?" He brightened at the prospect.

"No, but you can sit by comfortably and drink Bain's wine as his soldiers do the legwork," she cajoled.

"Fine." He sighed in feigned annoyance but followed her swiftly. "You're not going with them?"

"I should aim to be discreet and show my face as little as possible. Definitely not traipse about brothels and stir up a commotion with Bain's soldiers."

"Hang on," Kíli said suddenly, as if struck by inspiration, and tapped her on the shoulder repeatedly until she looked at him. "If they're going to the pleasure houses, I should go with them. You know, to make sure the investigation is conducted thoroughly."

Hem narrowed her eyes at him, suspicious. "How thorough is that? Raidin' every room and interrogatin' every lass in the house?"

Kíli leered at some internal fantasy, gazing into space. "Thorough enough."

"You know what?" Hem said, shaking her head. "I don't want to hear it. I don't even care as long as
you bring me those books.”

She got them. Within three hours, massive ledgers occupied the table of Hemery’s study at the courthouse. Though it was evening, the sun having set a while ago, she got straight to work, going through the last year in incoming and outgoing sums.

Sometime after midnight, Hem’s eyes stung with fatigue from working in the low-burning candles in the room, and her shoulders stung from leaning over the table.

She wanted to slap whoever thought this paperwork was any way to run a business. How was Bain supposed to know how much each house owed in tax unless their papers were in order? They should be fined for sloppy handwriting if nothing else.

However, Hem had found some inconsistencies at three establishments, which should be investigated further. Once or twice a week, on different days in different houses, there was no documented income. Hemery guessed that it was either due to the working girls having free days and therefore not bringing in any coin, which seemed odd—all being free at once—or the income was not documented because the coin from that day went elsewhere. Perhaps it went to an outside party, perhaps to pay someone for protection—someone like the butcher.

Hemery decided to call it a night at that. She reported her findings to Bain's captain on duty and left the courthouse to get some sleep at The Galley.

She was not allowed to rest for long. She woke to a cold sweat and the forceful tattoo of her heart as she tried to disperse the sensation of water in her lungs and a giant crushing snake around her body. She had dreamt about this before, she knew. But sometimes it got worse. This was one of those nights.

Instead of going back to sleep, she draped a blanket around herself and sat at the window looking out at the few flickering lights of the city through the thick glass. There was a full moon tonight, shining on the fog hovering over the house roofs. A bewitched spring night.

Hem flinched at the sudden knock on the door.

Pulling a dagger from under her pillow, she approached the door.

"What is it?"

"Miss," Raín answered. "The uthrab is here to see you. Says it's urgent."

In the middle of the night?

Hem opened a crack in the door. Sure enough, behind Raín’s forbidding arm stood Lida. Her eyes were as keen as always despite the late hour.

"Come in," Hem said, opening the door fully. Both Raín and Lida stepped through, and Hem closed the door.

Lida glanced at Raín, but Hem prompted her to speak.

"What's this urgent business that cannot wait until mornin'?

"I found him," Lida said.

Hem felt her hands go cold. She hardly dared believe it.
"The butcher?" she whispered, as if someone might overhear.

Lida lowered her chin in assertion. "An old storehouse in the Ashes. It's where they keep goods waiting to be sold or shipped, and . . . I think he's there right now, but not for long."

Hem shared a look with Raín who looked sceptical, or perhaps just worried, with her tense brow.

"How do you know it's him?" Hem asked Lida.

"I heard the men talking to one of them as if he's their master."

"You followed them?" Hem sighed. "I told you not to involve yourself—"

"What does it matter?" Lida interrupted, ignoring Hem's rebuke. "We need to go there right now, before he leaves."

Hem's mind raced. She needed to alert Bain. And Kíli who was staying at The Crown. Not for the first time today, she cursed the spoiled dwarf prince. Why could he not stay here with her if it was so bloody important for him to accompany her to Esgaroth in the first place?

No matter. She had to go at once.

"Raín," Hem began. "Go send two of the Wolves with this information—one to Bain and one to Kíli. Then come back here. I'll just dress, and then we'll go see about this storehouse."

Raín met her eye with hard-set features, frowning, but eventually nodding. "Aye, Miss."

Lida gave Raín exact directions and then waited by the back stairs as Hemery dressed. Hem made sure to bring all her knives though she knew her guards would be fully armed. Once more she wore her trousers and tunic beneath her long coat rather than a dress. Who knew what could happen if they found where the real butcher was hiding out?

The clear sky made it a cold night as well as a beautiful one. Hem pulled up her hood to protect against its chill. Similarly to last time, Lida led Hemery, Raín and three Iron wolves through narrowing streets and taller houses until Hem lost all sense of direction. Thankfully, the moon helped with finding north and south.

Suddenly, Lida slowed down and circled a large structure until she stopped, glancing furtively around the corner. Then she pulled back, looking at Hem and pointed onward.

"There," she said, slowly moving forward.

The others followed. They could see a light from within the storehouse. By a window, they could hear hushed, agitated voices but sadly no words.

A daring glance through the glass told Hem there were at least four people inside. She recognised one as the lad she and Lida encountered before—Petir. Chances were good that Lida was right about this being the butcher's storehouse, Hem estimated.

The street was quiet and the neighbourhood calm as she looked around. They needed to know who else was inside, but Hemery and her guards were not prepared to handle an unknown number of arrests. She did not have Bain and his soldiers' authority. She needed to wait for him, or his captain, to come to them before they could decide what should be done.

Besides, Hemery would rather stay as far away from the butcher as possible if she could.
A seagull cried overhead. Hem looked up, startled.

Something brushed by her leg. She froze, looking down. A cat had run across her feet. It was too dark to see it properly, but she heard its fading warning moan in the alley to her left.

She took a deep breath, fighting a wave of nausea. Had she been here before?

Hem looked around again. They should not be here. But the street was still calm.

"Let's pull back and wait for enforcements," Raín recommended in a low voice.


Lida, however, had not heard them. She crept closer, looking around the corner. Hem caught up with her but did not have time to speak before she saw the great black door on the other side.

It was so much like the door from her dreams—the door that was to be shattered by a great beast. But the beast was made up. She had made it up. It was not real.

Focus, Hem told herself. They needed to go.

"Lida, let's go," Hem whispered.

"Wait, I can hear them better from here." She carefully moved closer to the door.

"Come away," Hem hissed. What if the people inside heard them?

A scent disturbed Hemery's nose. A sharp smell of food gone bad. The Ashes always held a distinct aura of waste, but this triggered a fear in Hem.

"If I can just—" Lida leaned closer, grasped the handle, and pressed her ear to the door.

Was it rotten eggs Hem smelled? No, she realised; it was black powder.

"No!" She reached out to pull Lida back.

The world lit up in a flash and turned on its head as a great boom echoed in the air, in her head, in her belly, in her heart.

In the next instance, she fell on her back, hard, the wind knocked out of her. Something cracked in her chest, but she did not know what because her whole torso hurt. She could not draw air. It was like in her dreams where she was under water, where her lungs were crushed as if the great snake coiled around her and squeezed the life out of her.

Her head hurt from where it hit the ground. Her ears rang. Her eyes saw stars. Not real stars, but dancing bubbles of light, changing colours and slowly fading in front of her eyes.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to Dwarrow Scholar for the Khuzdul. I have applied it as I see fit with little regard to linguistic correctness.

uthrab: thief
After a long moment of gasping for breath, an eternity perhaps, Hemery felt hands on her cheeks. She blinked but could not focus enough to see who it was. The hands went to her shoulders, trying to help her to her feet.

She cried out in a broken, hoarse wheeze, as much as her paralyzed lungs allowed, at the pain bursting in the left shoulder. As she raised her good arm to shield it, they seemed to understand not to touch it.

Not until she was carried away from the upside-down world and the blinking lights did Hem know for sure that it was Raín who helped her. The blinking lights were not dancing bubbles anymore but transformed into tall burning flames in her periphery. The ringing in her ears lessened to uncover the shouting of a dozen voices, the creaking and breaking of wood as it crumbled under a heavy load, and splashing as the wood fell into water.

"What was . . . Was it . . . Where's . . .?" Hemery could hardly form words much less questions.

"Hush, Miss," Raín said gruffly. "No speaking now."

Hem did not know how long she was made to lay still in Raín's arms. Her head and shoulder hurt so much that it was a relief not to engage with her surroundings. She gathered that something horrible had happened at the storehouse, but she ignored it, selfishly. She kept her eyes closed, concentrating on breathing and keeping nausea at bay, letting herself be moved to wherever Raín wanted to move her.

A long while later, she realised she was brought back to her chambers. She heard Vannur's voice—forced calm but clipped with ire—as Raín carried her upstairs. Bror was probably there with them, only staying quiet.

Raín laid Hem down, and they tended to something on her head. Hem kept her eyes closed at all times, finding light and movement to disturb her equilibrium, only answering queries with humming or grunting short words.

For the first time, she truly trusted her guards with her life. She allowed them to tear open her shirt to examine her shoulder, to touch and prod any part of her, despite the pain. And she was grateful. For the first time, she felt gratitude for their unconditional presence and care.

At one point, Hemery closed her fingers around the hand nearest to her, halting its movements to catch their attention.

"Are you alright?" she asked softly, not bearing to speak louder. She knew they heard her.

"Don't bother with that now," Vannur said from the other side of the room.

"Raín?" Hem insisted, tightening her hold which probably was pretty weak at the moment, anyhow.

"Dwarves are made of tough flesh, Miss," Raín muttered. "Though I can't say the same for the damned fools inside that storehouse."

"Shhh," Vannur hushed them, pressing her palm on Hem's good shoulder. "There's time for that later. Let's set that bone right first."
Silently, Hem thanked the gods that they were all right, and tears of exhaustion and gratitude escaped her closed eyes.

When they were almost done tending to her head, Kíli burst through the door like a hurricane. Hem knew it was he because he had cursed up a storm already on the stairs that was heard all the way to her chambers.

She felt a blanket swiftly cover her upper body, and then Vannur hissed at Kíli.

"Sire, your discretion, please. And keep your voice down." None but King Thorin's personal guards would dare speak to a prince that way.

Hem cringed thinking about what he would have to say. This was just one more occasion for the Durins and their soldiers to admonish her for her negligence. Only this time, she had put others in danger as well. She supposed she should have had more patience, waited, but then perhaps the men from the storehouse would have gotten away. There was no right or wrong anymore; everything was just impossible, all the time.

"Report," Kíli demanded brusquely, his usual lighthearted humour gone. Here it comes, Hem thought, keeping her eyes closed.

Hem was about to reply when Raín spoke. "Miss Skinner was looking into the whereabouts of the wanted man, at a storehouse in the Ashes—"

"I know that much," Kíli interrupted. "What in the bloody name of Mahal happened when you got there?" he hissed. "There's nought left of but timber floating on the lake and a great hole in the dock."

"Booby trap," Raín explained. "Black powder primed to explode if anyone tried to enter."

"Id uthrab?" Kíli asked suspicious.

"She led us there, but she's not to blame for the damage," Raín replied. "The thief's the one who set it off. I don't think it was intentional. She's almost worse off than the wretches who were inside," she added with a mutter.

Hemery wanted to know what Raín meant by that, but she did not have the strength to raise her voice enough to ask.

"I don't care about them," Kíli said. "How is Hem?"

"Dislocated collarbone, perhaps some bruised ribs," Vannur stated. "But the worst is the blow to the head. You'll have your full report in the morning."

Kíli swore and started moving again. His heavy boots made hard, rhythmic thuds against the floor that reverberated through Hem's skull. She frowned and raised her palm as if to make a soothing gesture, hoping someone was paying attention.

"And sit down if you must stay," Vannur added. "You're disturbing Miss Hemery."

Hem felt her blankets being shifted, a weight settling beside her. A bowl was set down on the nightstand, with liquid inside, judging by the sound, water probably.

"Now, let's set that bone straight," Vannur said.
Hands held her chest still. Fingers ran along her skin over the bone. It did not hurt as much anymore, merely a dull throbbing in her joints.

Then the fingers pinched around the bone, pressing down in a sharp motion that felt like a stab of a needle into her very marrow. Hem opened her eyes and screamed. A short, cracked, surprised howl that turned into a gasp. A muted tock echoed through her ribcage. The fingers let go and were replaced by a cold, wet cloth.

The stabbing sensation faded into a persistent burn, and she finally drew breath, turning her head away from the pain, pressing the side of her face into the pillow. Then her eyes registered Kíli who sat by the bed; he had been the one to hold her down on that end to keep her from moving.

He watched her gravely. She did not like that look on his face.

"I'm not dead," Hem jested tiredly, but chose to close her eyes again. "Though I almost wish I was." Her head did not approve of any movements.

"You've survived orcs and Blackwater spies," Kíli said. "You can take a little knock on the head."

Careful fingers brushed at the hair around the wound in her skull.

"It may not look like much, but it really hurts," she moaned pitifully.

"Well, I hope it knocked some sense into of you, at least. Running around Lake Town at night, never a good idea."

"Kee. Not now." Hem frowned, not wanting to hear more disapproval. "I had guards with me. How was I supposed to know—"

"You were supposed to wait for me. Maybe you've had some sense knocked out?"

"Shut up before my head splits open. Unlike yours, I actually find mine useful and would like to keep it as it is."

Kíli gave a deep sigh, and Hem stole a glance at him beneath low eyelids. This time, his face was softer, a hint of a smile playing at his mouth.

"Uncle will kill me," he said, shaking his head.

A healer was called who gave Hemery a strong tea to help with the pain and to sleep. When the draught wore off, the pain in her head woke her. At her sleepy lament, a new cup was put to her lips by familiar hands.

"Hanah?" she managed pitifully after swallowing.

"Shh. Sleep. I'm here," Hanah answered. "Everythin' is alright."

Soft lips pressed against the back of her hand, blankets were tucked around her form, and a hand closed around hers, warm and real like an anchor. Hem fell back into painless sleep.

"The healer said it was fine," Hanah whispered.

The words slowly entered Hemery's mind through the fogs of sleep.
"They checked her sight and asked her all kinds of questions," she went on, impatiently. "When she wakes up, she'll probably be in pain again. There's no harm in letting her rest as much as possible. I'll not wake her before she comes to by herself."

Who was she speaking to? Why were there people in her chambers? She wanted to go back to sleep.

Hem attempted to turn on her side, but a burning in her shoulder like red-hot coal on her sinews made her jerk back, sharply drawing in breath through her nose and frowning.

"Hem?" Hanah's voice beckoned. A hand on her arm. "Try not to move."

She could not have moved her bad arm even if she wanted to, so that was fine. And her head still throbbed, though less than before, thankfully.

"Is there anymore of that nice tea?" Hem asked.

"Don't sleep yerself to death, ladybug," a gruff voice said.

"Dwalin?"

Hem cracked one eye open. The room was gloomy and dark, only a few candles burning. Night, she gathered. Hanah sat on the left side of her bed while Dwalin sat on the right.

"What are you doin' here?" she asked automatically, though she could guess the reason.

"Who else would have the patience to sit watch by yer sickbed only to be greeted with insolence?"

"'S nice to see you too," Hem slurred, groggily. "How 'bout a drink for a poor weaklin'?"

Dwalin huffed out a laugh at that.

"Later," Hanah replied. "You need to eat somethin' before you go back to sleep."

She brought a bowl of lukewarm soup up to Hem's chin. The broth that earlier would have turned her stomach now held promises of heaven in its scent. Hanah fed her, like a child, spoon after spoon of potatoes and carrots, and then soaked up the rest of the broth for her with a bread roll. Then she drank a cup of water, not realising how thirsty she was until it was empty.

"How long have I slept?" Hem asked Hanah when she felt more awake and less like a dying cripple.

"A day. Since early this mornin'—it's after midnight now."

She lit a lantern on the table. Hem hummed dismissively and shielded her eyes against it. Hanah moved it to the floor by her chair where its glare did not reach Hem.

"How are you feelin'?"

"My head doesn't feel like an anvil in Dwalin's forge anymore," Hem said. "It's simmered down to just a regular, murderous headache now. And I can't move my left arm. I can use my hand but nothin' above the wrist."

"It's probably the swellin'," Hanah said. "The healer warned about that. It should be better in a few days."
Hemery sighed. She was in for a dull few days, most likely staying in bed. "You'll not yell at me?" she looked between her sister and Dwalin.

Dwalin just stared back, looking as disapproving as usual, no more and no less. Hanah shrugged. "I think you're experiencin' enough punishment for your carelessness as it is, don't you?" Hanah said.

"I hope so because I don't think I could stand anythin' worse."

"Well," Dwalin began, "there might be somethin' worse for ye to look forward to."

Hem met his eye, apprehensive.

"Thorin's here," Dwalin went on. "Wanted to see ye as soon as ye wake up."

A thrill of warmth as well as anxiety went through her. "Dear Mahal . . ." And poor Kíli who had to face him first.

"You don't have to, you know," Hanah assured her.

It was not that Hem did not want to see Thorin; it was just the circumstances that were always so unfortunate.

"He's probably sleepin' at this hour. Maybe he can wait just a little while longer. . . ?" she said hesitantly.

"He can wait for the mountain to grow," Dwalin said. "I care not."

Hem smiled. "Thanks for the backup, Dwa."

"Let him stew. Ye're not his wife yet," he reminded, settling back in his chair.

No, but soon. Hem would rather not talk about it right now.

"Have you heard anythin' about what happened?" she asked them. "I mean, what happened afterwards?"

"No, nothin' besides your direct involvement," said Hanah. "And frankly, I don't care." She sighed, tiredly.

Hanah had most likely come from Erebor as soon as she had heard about Hem's . . . acci\textit{dent}. A long trip, a long day, and a long night just to wait on her.

"I just want all this to be over with so you can come home."

Hem gripped her sister's hand. "I know."

Dwalin rose from his seat, going to stand by the window, looking out onto the dark streets.

"Kíli's been busy all day with Bain," he said. "A lot's goin' on. They're bringin' people in—interrogations, arrests. The courthouse is in a right state."

He did not seem to approve of their proceedings, or perhaps he was just annoyed that he was not allowed to butt in where he thought his expertise was needed.
Hem sighed. "I should be down there."

"Ye're not goin' anywhere until the healer says otherwise," Dwalin growled at her over his shoulder.

Hanah just shook her head meaningfully, not needing to articulate her agreement.

"I know. It's not like I can move properly, anyway," Hem said. "I just wished I knew everyone was alright. I think the guards were mostly unharmed, but no one has said anythin' about Lida."

Hanah tilted her head in thought.

"My guide," Hem elaborated.

"Oh," Hanah simply said but seemed reluctant to say anything else. Reluctant—not ignorant.

"What?"

"Ye mean the thief?" Dwalin questioned.

"Aye, but don't call her that. Her name's Lida. What news of her?"

"Heard from Kee that she'd been taken to the house of healin'. No word since."

"Oh, no," she groaned. Hem feared for her. Lida had been closer to the blast, after all. "If you have the opportunity, could you go and inquire about her? I need to know how badly she's injured."

"Just save yer strength for healin'," Dwalin said. "Let Bain and Kee worry about the rest."

"Please," Hem insisted. "This is important. She has no one to look after her, and I'm the one who put her at risk. Could you do this for me—for my peace of mind?"

Dwalin muttered to himself by the window before answering. "Very well. I'll make sure she's alive for ye."

"Thanks, Dwa."

He gave her a long glance and then finally grunted back in confirmation.

"I'll inform Thorin that ye're lucid and have been fortunate enough to keep yer arms and legs. That'll pacify him for the moment."

With that, Dwalin left Hem's chambers.

Hanah smiled at her. "He's been so worried. Been wearin' a hole in the floor outside with his pacin'."

"And you haven't?" Hem asked.

"Of course, but I have no problem makin' you feel guilty by admittin' that I've been worried sick. He does, though. Always have to be the untouchable, stone-cold dwarf."

"Don't they all?" Hem smiled back.

Hanah's smile faded after a moment.

"I hate to say it," she began, "but you'll have to be more careful in the future."
"Oh, gods." Hem scoffed. "Not you too. I'm already walkin' on fuckin' eggshells, tip toein' through the tulips with these bloody guards," she grumbled. "I can't be more careful. Shit just happens."

Hanah shook her head. "Then I guess you'll have to start trustin' people more."

"What do you mean?"

"Send your guards to check up on things while you stay put. That's what they're for. That way you're all happy."

"Accordin' to Thorin, that's not what they're for," Hem amended.

"Then send Bain's. Again—I don't care. Just send anyone else, and if they're stupid enough to go, then let them. It's not your problem—everythin's not your problem," Hanah repeated for emphasis.

"But this is what I do, why Bain chose me. Goin' places, talkin' to people—that's what I'm for."

"He didn't choose you to just send on risky errands at night." Hanah's eyes bore into her. "You're not expendable. You knew it was dangerous to go, and you still went, though you could have easily sent Bain's or Kíli's men."

"They could've gotten away—" Hem struggled.

"Then you would've found another way. These people, thinkin' themselves powerful, always makes mistakes." Hanah shrugged, enforcing her previous words; she did not care about the butcher and his business. "And you would not be lyin' here right now. Your friend, the thief, would not be laid up at the healers as we speak."

Hem had no argument for that.

"You're good," Hanah went on. "A good fighter and a good diplomat, but you're no soldier. Let the guards and the soldiers do their job, and stay out of harm's way, please. I'm sick of worryin' about you."

"Just because I'm not an ordinary smith anymore—because I now work for Bain, and I'm about to marry Thorin—I have to shut myself in, stop doin' things, stop bein' myself?" Hem questioned petulantly.

She knew she was being childish and had been well aware that these conflicts would arise eventually. Subconsciously, her sister allowed her to voice it all freely, like when she was a child and could rail against everything and anything.

"You've never been an ordinary smith," Hanah explained, unmoved and unapologetic. "Not since Father died. Ordinary smiths aren't in as much danger in their entire lifetime as you've been this last year. It goes hand in hand—people know your name, know your face, and nothin' will ever be the same."

Hanah was right, Hem admitted to herself. Her actions put her in danger, and what concessions she had made thus far were not cutting it. She would have to work harder at staying alive from now on.

Hemery slept a few more hours with a new draught of tea. She woke again at noon. Hanah was there with bread, cheese, and ordinary ginger and lemon tea. After eating what Hanah considered an appropriate amount, she cleaned her teeth and washed with Hanah's help. Her hair was especially challenging, but it had to be done; in its tresses hid not only dried blood but also dirt and
grime. Cleaning it took a while since they had to keep water out of the wound.

She had managed to sit up while washing, but Hem lay back down on the bed in a fresh nightshirt afterwards, all her energy drained and her headache starting up again.

She had just begun to relax when a sound disturbed her. A sharp crack, like a snap of wood in a fire but stronger. It came from Hem's left, from the window. Then another.

"What in the bloody halls of . . ." Hanah muttered, moving to look out.

"Is it a bird or somethin'?" Hem asked, throwing an arm over her eyes to shield them from the light when Hanah opened first the curtain and then the window.

Hem undoubtedly heard birds as the window was pushed open—as well as dogs and carts and people's voices from the street below.

"It's Kíli and Dwalin," Hanah said, surprised. Then she called down to them, "What do you think you're doin'? Will you pay for the glass if it breaks?"

"Heads up," Hem heard Kíli's voice, distant as if he spoke from two storeys down—which he probably was. "Uncle is on his way," he warned.

"Oh, dear," Hanah muttered, pulling the window shut. "Think the jolly fellow wants to cheer you up?" she asked sarcastically. "Doesn't he realise you need rest?"

Hanah promptly tidied up the room, stacked dishes onto the tray with which they had been brought, stuffed Hem's dirty laundry into a bag, and removed the bathwater by emptying the basin out the window, aiming for the canal below. Being back at The Galley brought back the chambermaid in Hanah, Hem thought amused.

Half of the water landed in the canal, half on the docks—as was common in Lake Town; it would seep through the wide cracks in the wood anyway so no one cared. Unfortunately, Kíli had apparently not moved from his spot beneath the window and yelped as he caught some of the spray.

"Have a care, woman!" he cried indignantly, not used to Lake Town's domestic methods.

"Well, what are you loiterin' down there for?" Hanah barked, annoyed, as if he had inconvenienced her and not the other way around. "Stop leanin'. Don't you have somewhere to be?"

Keeping back laughter made Hem's chest hurt.

Leaving the window, Hanah came over to straighten Hem's blankets around her before there was a knock on the door. Instead of answering, Hanah leaned further over the bed.

"Remember," she whispered, "you don't have to. I can tell him you're sleepin' or tell him to bugger off—whichever you prefer."

Hem smiled. "It's fine. Let him in."

Hanah nodded. "Alright."

She opened the door for King Thorin.

"Your Highness," she greeted, bowing her head politely. "Come in."
"Thank you, Miss Hanah," he grunted, stepping inside with heavy strides.

His eyes swept the room, landing on Hemery in her bed for a moment and then away. He came to stand in the middle of the room, face blank, seemingly taking in his surroundings—the furnishings, the low fire, the dimness.

When he did not speak, Hem looked at Hanah by the door.

"You should rest as well, Han," she said, giving Hanah a thin smile. It was returned in a similarly tense fashion.

"I'll come back later," Hanah promised. Then she left, closing the door behind her.

Hemery turned her attention to Thorin. He was watching the windows, noticing the slight breeze allowed in.

"You will catch your death in this draft," he muttered, pulling the window shut with a jerk and a twist of the handle. "Still frost out." He pulled the curtain closed, as well, to soften the beam of sunlight pushing in across the room.

Then he sat down in the chair to the left where Hanah had sat earlier. He was not looking directly at her, more occupied with rubbing his hands together absently.

"So," he said, "You are awake at last."

Not a question that demanded an answer, but still.

"Aye." Hem felt like making excuses for some reason. "I haven't really had the strength for visitors."

"Visitors?" Thorin glanced at her with a frown. "No, I suppose not." He looked away again. "How are you?"

"I'll live. Dislocated collarbone, some bruises—"

"I received the report," he interrupted. "I know you're injured—but how are you?"

"Right," Hem said. He had gotten the report from his guards; now he wanted it from her.

"Rattled. Helpless. Worried about what's goin' on out there." She motioned with her chin towards the window. "I haven't seen Kili since yesterday mornin'. I've no idea what's happenin'."

"Are you in pain?" he asked.

She could still feel the sluggishness in her limbs from the tea, but the agony in her head had not returned. It was merely a simmering smolder—at the moment.

"Not right now," she said.

He nodded.

"Will you tell me some news?" Hem requested. "What are Kili and Bain doin'?"

Thorin leaned forward, still looking down at his hands as he spoke.

"You found him," he said. "Or at least his storage. Not all of it sunk into the lake—some spoils
remained. Goods from other thefts carried out during the year. Only a fraction of the black powder was recovered which means the rest has been distributed elsewhere."

"Sold?" Hem asked.

"Perhaps," he replied. "Or stored somewhere else."

"Then it wasn't all used in the... incident?" She chose her words carefully, not wanting to trivialise her involvement but also not draw attention to it if she could help it.

He shook his head. "That was merely the work of a few pounds. A barrel full would have much greater consequences, to say nothing of five of them. Still, priming the trap, they could have no conception of what kind of blast it would produce. Otherwise, the fools would not have lingered in the vicinity."

"What of the men inside?" She was almost too afraid to ask.

"Two men died in the collapse."

Hem was taken aback, not sure what to feel about this. Death was always unfortunate, Thorin used to say. Perhaps seeing it as such would be sympathy enough. And they were not completely innocent men after all, themselves having rigged the black powder to blow.

"There may have been others present, though none but two were apprehended in their escape," he went on. "Faced with an official inquiry consisting of Kíli, Bain, myself, and the magistrates at the courthouse, their nerves did not hold long. One confessed to being part of the robbery—he was identified by the bookkeeper—but claimed the one they call the butcher was killed in the collapse. However," Thorin paused, glancing at her again but averting his eyes soon enough, "Beren was shown the bodies of the men and swore none of them was the man he met with."

Damn it, Hem swore to herself, fisting a hand in her blanket.

"The man may have attempted to protect his employer," he added, "but it actually worked in our favour. Rumours spread of the butcher's demise at his own hand, and hence others have been much cooperative, opening their doors and admitting to working with him—under threat of violence from the butcher, of course, not their own free will. The host of one of the pleasure houses that Kíli investigated helped identify several of the butcher's men who Bain consequently imprisoned. He has begun to unravel a tightly spun web, interrogating one prisoner at a time."

A knot inside Hem loosened a bit—not completely, but a little. They were moving in the right direction. She tried not to think about whether it all could have been resolved without demolishing a building and killing two men.

"Could I see the records of the magistrate hearings?" she asked.

Thorin hesitated. "You should not trouble yourself until you are healed."

"I wouldn't have to move from this bed," she attempted to compromise. "I could ask Vannur to collect—"

"Your guard has been relieved of duty."

"What?" she said, confused. She had a feeling he did not mean 'relieved' as in that their watch was ended merely for the day.
"Not all of them," Thorin went on. "But the ones who escorted you to the storehouse are suspended until we can establish whether regulations were adhered to or not, in order to rule out harmful intent and general carelessness."

Hem could not believe her ears. "But . . . Where are they now?"

"Returned to Erebor. Balin will oversee the interviews and the reports, deciding on possible reprimands or corrections."

"But that could take days—weeks," Hem calculated.

"Bror and the Iron Wolves will cover the rest of your stay here," he added, as if he believed her puzzlement was due to concern for her own wellbeing. If so, he could not be more wrong.

"Vannur wasn't even there that night. Her shift was ended," she argued, ignoring his comment. "She and Bror were sleepin'. Just Raín and some Wolves came with me. And Raín really did her best to protect me, specifically advisin' me that we should not delay. It was I—I decided to linger, talkin' to Lida instead of heedin' Raín recommendation. She did nothin' wrong—"

"That remains to be seen," Thorin countered, clearly having made up his mind about the inquest. "Vannur is the superior officer of your security detail. She is responsible for the others' conduct regardless if she is present or not. This is the way of things."

Poor Vannur and poor Raín, Hem thought. Though she did not believe such inquests were rare, she figured a suspension from one's duties was still a disgrace, however temporary. Or perhaps such an instance indeed was rare when a subject of a guard's watch was actually injured—like Hemery had been—judging by how severely failure was regarded.

Not for the first time, Hem sent a thankful thought and a blessing to her guards. They were the most hardworking people she knew, on shifts ranging from eight to twelve hours at a time, six days a week. And now they were under investigation. Hem could imagine none more undeserving of doubt.

"If you wish to help them return to full duty as soon as possible," Thorin said, "you may document your experience of the night in question in depth, as you also will be asked to bear witness to their actions preceding and during the event. A useful way to spend your indisposition."

Hem forced herself to relax her jaw and brow, since it worsened the tension in her skull, reluctantly conceding that his words were reasonable, no matter how infuriating. It was not totally Thorin's fault that Vannur, Raín, and the others were suspended; it was the proper procedure of things, existing to keep people safe. Though Thorin—king that he was—was well within his power to nullify the rule, just this once, if he felt so inclined. Clearly, he felt no inclination whatsoever to do so or to accept Hem's assurance of Raín's probity and valour. Not even Vannur whom Thorin had employed as his personal guard was above suspicion.

"You don't believe me?" Hem asked carefully. Uncertainly.

Thorin sighed, unwilling to engage the issue. "I believe you think they are beyond reproach. But unconditionally trust your judge of character? You who are known to take strays from the market under your wings, nourishing thieves at your breast." He sounded almost amused.

She had indeed paid Lida, a known thief, to perform tasks for her, but she did not approve of the likeness.

"You called me a stray once upon a time," she snapped.
"The uthrab, Tarren Low, Brage's daughter—the list grows long," he argued methodically. "A bleeding heart has no place in a court room."

Hem knew Thorin believed in a pragmatic approach to leadership; the best solution is the one that results in the least problems for the most people. This was a lesson learned after two hundred years of trying to rule a nation. It was not easily bargained for empathy. Sometimes, however, Hem feared he did not see the people for the trees and consequently forsook the right action for the overtly prudent one.

"That's exactly where it is needed most," she insisted, impassioned.

Faltering in his resolve, Thorin shot her a fleeting look—one of the few during his whole visit—but got out of his chair and turned away before she could decipher the expression in his eyes.

"As soon as Kíli learns the end of the remaining black powder, I'll be expecting your immediate return to Erebor," he said evenly.

The veracity of the sentence was the only thing that stopped Hem from gaping in speechless rage at his arrogance and presumption. As it was, his rude reminder of her obligation to answer his call—together with his pronounced belief that Kíli ought to solve the question of the missing barrels of black powder, as opposed to her—met with silent acquiescence from Hemery. This because his impolite not-quite-request rang true; she had promised to return when the robbery was solved or when the month of their engagement had passed, whichever came first. Even if she had the strength—which she did not—and even if she had the desire—which she did not—she could not have argued with him over his infuriating bluntness.

Sullenly giving him the benefit of a doubt on the second point, surmising that Kíli would learn the location of the black powder the moment she herself did, she in turn answered him coldly.

"Indeed, Your Highness." She averted her eyes, turned her face to her left, and ignored how the movement put pressure on her skull in favour of avoiding his gaze as he had avoided hers so far.

His feet moved to the door; she could tell by his footfalls. Before he opened the door to leave, he spoke again, rougher this time, as if suppressing some emotion.

"I . . ." he paused. "I wish you a swift recovery."

"Thank you," she replied blandly, still facing away from him.

The door opened and closed, leaving Hemery in silence and solitude the likes of which she had only felt in the nightmares of the past months. Thoughtfully and restlessly, she fingered her knuckles only to find them bare.

Sitting up in nameless panic, she scanned the room. Her head began to pound, matching her heart.

Where?

In an instance, no longer than three breaths, her eyes settled on the night table where the clasp Thorin had given her rested next to the grey-gemmed ring. Exhaling sharply, her hand shot out, grasped the ring, and pulled it to her chest. Holding it tightly in both hands, she laid back, relieved, willing her heart and her breathing to slow.

After a moment, she relaxed enough to open her fist and raised the ring to look at.

Why had she reacted so strongly just now? Her stomach had not stopped turning quite yet. But why had she been gripped by an anxiety, stronger than that she felt at the storehouse, at the thought that she had lost it?

Hem stared at the milky stone, filmy grey like fog filling a glass globe. Swirling fog over water on a summer night.

She gasped.

Did it just . . . move? She stared at it harder, raising the ring to her face.

The grey smoke inside did indeed shift before her eyes. Clouds taking shape, morphing into a coiling creature. It slithered like a serpent around its own body until its head lifted, enlarged, and opened its maw towards her in a soundless roar. Then it disappeared in a puff.

Was it the water demon from her dream? The dream of the door?

She had no time to dwell on it because new images were conjured on the jewel's surface.

Clouds elongated to pylons, moving toward her, as if she moved between them, among them. Or perhaps between trees in a forest, she could not tell. Were there creatures hiding among the trees? Wolves or spirits hiding behind them, moving alongside her. Suddenly piercing eyes and sharp teeth lunged at the globe's ceiling.

Hem flinched, hearing the screech of the attacker.

The door opened.

She looked up. It was only Hanah, back after seeing Thorin leave, no doubt. The screeching sound was the creak of the wooden floor beneath Hanah's feet.

Hem looked down at the ring again. Its surface as calm, smooth, and still as the marble in Erebor's walls. She breathed out in relief, embarrassed to have let her get so scared by a silly trick of the light. Or perhaps a trick of her exhaustion, the head injury, or the tea—one of those factors, surely.

Silently, she slipped it on and settled back in her bed, listening to Hanah chatter about the lacking standards at The Galley since they both worked there ten years ago.

And if Hem now and then glanced curiously at the dull gem on her knuckle, she would not admit it, even to herself.
Unexpected Envoy

Two more nights Hemery spent in her chambers with only her sister and Dwalin for company. And occasionally Kíli's gossip. Late at night, after his work for the day was over, he would come round The Galley to break word with them before he himself went to bed. He had ultimately switched inns from the smarter Crown to the homely Galley—to stay close, Hem guessed. She had no idea whether Thorin remained in Esgaroth at all or if he had returned to Erebor by now.

"The lad feels the sting of the king's whip on his neck," Dwalin had said when Hem asked about Kíli's odd visits. "Has no time to spare durin' the day."

But when he had time, Kíli sat with them, drinking tea and wine, discussing the day's proceedings until Hanah kicked them all out, stating it was time for Hem to sleep.

Kíli and Bain had managed to round up a considerable number of the butcher's men—and women for that matter—as well as others who worked with him on illegal schemes or otherwise benefitted from his business. There was much left to be done, but morale had risen in Lord Bain's ranks as well as in the people on his streets. Furthermore, Bain had managed to save face during Erebor's intervention due to Beren's involvement, enforcing the dwarves' right to meddle without demanding Bain's explicit request. No one wants to be seen begging for help, Hem mused.

The list of perpetrators still on the loose dwindled. Now only documentation and the official hearings remained and, lastly, the trials. It would be a colossal affair with dozens of accused. The magistrates had their work cut out for the next few months.

They had no new leads on where the black powder had gone, and despite of Kíli's hard work in the recent days, it did not appear as though any would present themselves. Yet, Hemery refused to give up. She still had two weeks before Thorin would expect her back in Erebor. She planned to spend them at the courthouse, reviewing once more the material from the hearings in the hope of finding some trace of the black powder.

But first, as soon as she was able, she would see to Lida.

Before all else, Dwalin had assured Hemery that Lida would live. But then he had warned her of the sight she was to see at the healers. When, at last, she went to see for herself, she found that Dwalin had been correct in doing so.

On the fourth day after the incident, when Hem was allowed to test her strength and exert herself a little, she went with Hanah and Dwalin to the house of healing. Dwalin waited outside with Bror and Dagrún, Hanah's guard. With her left arm in a sling to her chest, Hem used her right hand to cover her mouth when she beheld Lida on the cot. The bed was surrounded by gossamer-like curtains which most likely prevented dust and infections from touching her but did little to hide her appearance.

The right side of her face was covered in thin gauze, clinging to her skin from forehead to neck and supposedly continued down her chest as it disappeared beneath the sheet. Parts of her scalp was burnt as well, leaving her hair singed by the flames or cropped short by the healers. Her eyes were closed, features smooth in sleep.

From Hem's angle, and as the light that let in from the window fell on Lida's bandages, she resembled an embalmed person, only a carcass left of the former self. In order to disperse the
sensation of stillness and death, Hem reached out to touch her hand but found it also covered in
gauze—only thicker, compact. This binding was not meant to sooth enflamed skin as that on her
face but to still bleeding flesh she realised when the digits on that hand did not match the number
on her left. The little finger was missing, as was the tip of the ring finger, cut at the third knuckle.

Hem moved to Lida's left and slipped her fingers through the curtain to lightly touch her unchanged
hand. Relieved, she felt warmth under her palm. Having satisfied her curiosity and scattered the
imagined ghosts from the room, she withdrew her hand. Hem did not wish to disturb her.

"They must've given her somethin' strong for her to be sleepin' so heavily," Hanah said softly.
"Otherwise, the pain . . ." she trailed off.

"Aye," Hem agreed in a whisper, voice cracking.
"Can't even imagine," Hanah finished.

Hem sat down next to Lida's cot. Leaning back, rubbing a hand over her mouth in deep thought,
she tried to think of a reason—any reason—how this was not Hem's fault. She found it exceedingly
difficult. She had given Lida several chances to walk away, to not pursue the butcher on Hem's
behalf. But Hem had offered her silver; so how much choice did Lida have in the end? Poor
beggars—or beggars, rather—like Lida had no choice. All coin was good coin to a hungry belly.
Of course Lida would accept any and all Hem offered, no matter the risk.

A fat tear fell from Hem's eyelashes before she closed her eyes. Her face crumbled with a silent sob
as more tears escaped.

"She's not in pain now," Hanah said, placing a warm hand on Hem's shoulder. "These healers know
burns like no other. She couldn't be in better care."

Hem nodded, her head bowed to hide her shame. Admittedly, Lida was no innocent flower, but
neither was Hemery, and she did not deserve this.

After a moment, she drew a shaky breath, willing away the tears. She could not change this. She
could not have Lida's suffering and injuries undone, but Hem would do her damnedest to make it
up to her. Somehow.

The next day, as Hemery sat in her hard, wood chair at the courthouse, going over the records of
the hearings and Kíli's summary reports, she was interrupted by a commotion—voices and banging
doors from outside.

Alarmed, she got up. Beyond her door, Bror stood guard, tense and suspicious towards. . . well,
everything, as usual. He and two Iron Wolves followed her to the main hall where she made out
Kíli and Bain at the front of the room and a mix of soldiers, men and dwarves, as well as people in
civilian attire crowding the room.

"Stop," Bain called out over the clamour. The noise died down as the soldiers relaxed and stepped
away from the civilians. Hem recognised two faces among them.

Tarren Low and Graham.

She froze in the doorway. To what did Bain owe the pleasure of such unexpected company, Hem
wondered.

"Let the man speak," Bain went on, authoritatively, attempting to keep people calm.
Hem was not particularly fond of Graham herself, but she did not see why the soldiers were so quick to hostility towards them all. Erebor's peace with Blackwater was new and fragile, but Bain had never had reason to expect violence from Blackwater.

"I'll say this once," Tarren began, curtly and clearly—obviously not glad of the aggressive welcome. "We are not thieves. This is a courtesy visit to avoid further bad blood between the mountain and the ridge."

When he was certain none would interrupt him again, he continued in a measured and unhurried pace.

"Two moons ago, when Brage still sat at the big house in Blackwater, he expressed an interest in acquiring black powder for blasting in the ridge. A week ago, four gentlemen arrived in Blackwater with rare cargo for which they expected payment. It seems," Tarren paused, raising his voice and articulating to make sure everyone heard him, "that the late master of Blackwater either did not care or did not know whom he was doing business with. Since the cargo lacked any and all paperwork, I decided to inquire where they got it from, which has in turn led us here."

Tarren swung out an arm and bowed his head toward Bain and Kíli.

"Since there seem to be such a debate about the black powder," he added, "I hereby offer to return it to Lord Bain if he so wishes."

"Or we can pay for it," Graham spoke up suddenly. "M'lord."

Tarren shot him a cold look but said nothing to refute his proposal.

Bain conferred with Kíli a moment at the other end of the room before answering. "Convenient, do you not agree, that Brage alone would have struck this deal? How do we know this is indeed the case and not an elaborate excuse once the hunt for the powder came too close for comfort?"

"I do not wish to repeat myself, my lords. You do as you please," Tarren said to Bain and Kíli, respectfully but without compromising his own integrity. "It's the truth whether My Lords believe it or not—makes little difference to me."

Hem shared Bain's skepticism, but at the moment, with no alternative means of retrieving the black powder, perhaps one should not look too closely at a gift horse. She did not know Mister Low well, but he had been a friendly face in Blackwater when all others looked at her and the dwarves as the plague. She had no reason to distrust him and neither did Bain.

Bain listened to Tarren's words, heard the determination in them, and then glanced at Kíli who nodded.

"My men will accompany you to Blackwater where they'll relieve you of the barrels and apprehend these gentlemen you speak of. Then you'll be free to go, with our thanks," he said finally, sincerely.

Bain motioned to one of his captains who stepped forward with his lieutenants.

"And my men will aid in the recovery," Kíli added, desperate to see this through to the end but masking it with a jovial tone.

"Though if you would, My Lord, consider a sale—" Graham attempted once more.

"You will consider your good fortune, Mister Graham," Kíli interrupted, letting him know in no uncertain terms that he was remembered, "when Lord Bain allows you to leave his house without
shackles."

"What's chippin' at his chisel?" Dwalin muttered by Hem's ear.

Startled, she looked over her shoulder. Unnoticed, Dwalin had approached to stand behind her.

"Graham doesn't exactly inspire patience and generosity in the hearts of men," Hem replied in a whisper. "Seems to have even less luck with dwarves."

"You know this fool?" Dwalin crossed his arms over his chest, observing the spectacle in Bain's courthouse with contempt.

"Aye, though I wish I didn't." Hem kept her focus on the visitors.

"Respectfully," Graham went on in the middle of the hall, "I worked with Lord Brage a long time before he passed. He may have had some outlandish ideas of progress and preservation, but I agree with some of his concerns. Not only could we use the powder for mining of the ridge but also for protection."

A murmur went through the gathering, expressing divided thoughts on the legitimacy of Graham's claims.

"We haven't even rebuilt the town," Tarren spoke up against him then, low but clearly. "You'd see us all blown up to conquer your own fear."

"You were there, Prince Kíli, when the orcs came," Graham argued. "Who's to say they'll not return? Walls of planks and nails will not protect us. Blackwater needs stronger fortifications. Stronger weapons."

"You know nothing of the power you wish to wield," Kíli said. "Black powder is not to be used for offensive purposes. It's unstable, unreliable. It cannot be harnessed the way you describe without immense risk to the town."

"I don't think you understand—"

"No, you don't understand. You don't understand how a treaty and a council functions. You're no longer the master of Blackwater. In fact, you never were. You're merely one member of a council put together to make decisions for the whole town who for some reason—unknownst to me—chose to include you in it. Any negotiations regarding Blackwater's mines and security will be conducted in Blackwater with our representatives. I'm disturbed by the distinct lack of them here at this moment. My guess is you already broached the subject with them, and they gave you the same answer as I have." Kíli paused to pierce Graham with his stare. "You'd do well to learn from Brage's mistakes. Alienating Erebor and Esgaroth is not the way to secure your home's future."

"Besides," Bain interjected, coughing awkwardly in the tension, "I don't own the powder. It already has a buyer in the south. The barrels are not for sale." He paused with a sigh. "I doubt I will stock it in my warehouses anytime soon. Its business has no place here."

He moved toward Tarren and Graham, the crowd parting as he went.

"But more importantly, tomorrow, you'll provide the solution to the trial of the decade. Congratulations," he said with a sarcastic twist to his lips.

Tomorrow, Hem mused, began the end. In two days, they could be bringing the powder back to Esgaroth. In three days, she would with all likelihood be returning to Erebor. Could it be this
simple? She felt as if all she had done was talk bollocks for three weeks and trip over a storehouse.

Hem smiled crookedly and turned to Dwalin. "I guess this is it. It's over, really."

"Aye, aye," Dwalin muttered with a frown. "That's all well and good, but what's with that miserable prick?"

Not at all bothered or relieved that the robbery seemed resolved at last, he nodded suspiciously with his chin toward Graham, the beaten and frustrated man who trailed after Tarren out the door.

"You don't want to know," Hem said with a sigh.

"How is that?"

Hem thought about how rude Graham had been to both her and her sister, not to mention the trouble he had made for Hanah ten years ago. Hem still saw the blood in her dreams sometimes. She did not divulge this, however; it was Hanah's business. She was not sure even Fíli knew who Graham was and his role in how the sisters had to flee Blackwater.

"'Cause you'd probably kill him if you knew," was all she offered.

Hanah and Dwalin returned to the mountain once Hemery swore to not hurt herself during the last couple of days in Lake Town. Dwalín had work to do; Hanah too, plus motherly duties. Thus, Hem was bored and alone.

She spent some of her time at the courthouse helping Kíli and Bain's captains with documentation, but mostly, she did so for the walk and fresh air between the court and The Galley. She shared some meals with Kíli, and he kept up his evening visits. Twice, she visited Lida at the healers. When Lida was awake, she was not allowed to speak, so Hem just sat quietly by her for an hour at a time. Some of the time, she read or rested in her own chambers. The rest of the time, Hem worried about the future. About the safe retrieval of the powder, about her marriage, about Thorin, and about Lida.

If Hemery thought the pending conclusion of her task in Esgaroth would ease her heart, she was sadly mistaken. Her mind was slowly winding down after the past few weeks of vigilance. But at night, when her eyes closed, she found herself going over papers she had read a hundred times, repeating conversations she had conducted days ago, not really letting go of the work she was supposed to be finished with.

And she dreamt. The streets and paths of her old nightmare transformed into a dense, dark forest with creatures chasing her, their growls at her heels, until she fell through darkness into crushing depths of water.

It was supposed to go away, she thought in despair after waking. The foreboding she had sensed—she thought it had been the blast of the storehouse. The stress she had experienced—was it not the weights which had been placed on her by Thorin and Bain? If not, then what?

She tried to calm her mind and settle on her back against the pillows since she could not lie on her side due to the bad shoulder. What sleep she managed to find was shallow.

Surely, she would feel better once she was back home. Right?
The barrels made loud clunks as they were unloaded from the carriage onto the dock. Two men took each barrel, turned it on its side, and rolled them up the gangplank of a ship. They had been opened, searched, and refilled before Bain even considered sending them downriver to their intended buyer.

"I'm not keeping these barrels in my city even for one night," Bain stated.

He, Kíli, and Hemery stood aside, watching his men at work.

"A wise decision, My Lord," Kíli agreed. "Perhaps this should be the standard procedure for every shipment from now on? Ship it out the same day it arrives."

"Perhaps." Bain was probably too exhausted to anticipate more shipments of these cursed goods.

"Do we know what the buyer aims to use the powder for?" Hem asked, almost afraid to hear the answer.

"Masonry, I believe," Bain said. "In the south. Cracking big stones for buildings. I don't really care as long as it's not here."

Hem guessed that was alright as she watched the ship's captain sign for all his goods with the dock's overseer. Then the plank was withdrawn, the sails raised, and the ship softly began making its way across the lake to the south outlet.

"So . . ." Bain said, "I guess your time here is up."

"Aye," Hem replied. "I'm leaving today. Just after this, actually."

The ship had been scheduled to sail in the early morning, and Hemery had no more duties to fulfill in Esgaroth after seeing it safely off.

"I thank you for your time." Bain reached out to shake her hand. "I might not agree with your methods, but I cannot argue with your results."

"I did my best, my lord," she said, reluctant to get into the hows and whys of her decisions during her time in Esgaroth. "Might we consider the king's debt repaid?"

"I believe we will consider the debt to have changed hands, a service done for my city which I will never be able to repay."

"You could have done the same," Hem dismissed. "I just would have taken longer. The robbery was the butcher's final mistake."

"Let's hope he stays buried," Bain said, more concerned than relieved. "And that I'll never need your services again."

"I'd say I agree but for the detail where you do ask if and when you need it."

Bain smiled tiredly and nodded.

"In that case," Kíli cut in, "might I suggest you ask someone else next time. The way Miss Skinner hurts herself while 'helping', you will only make the king wish to murder us all in our sleep," he joked with a chuckle. Perhaps he partially meant it.
"Funny," Hem commented dryly with a tight smile that was more like a grimace.

"Farewell," Bain said finally, shaking Hem's hand, and strode off, leaving her and Kíli on the dock.

"Are you comin' back with me?" Hem asked Kíli as they began walking back to The Galley.

"I'm drowning in parchment," he said. "Must get all the documents in order for the trial to run smoothly later. If anything goes wrong due to clerical errors, Uncle will cut off my—" He stopped and corrected himself. "Ears."

She snorted in laughter. "Poor little prince. Such responsibilities you bear."

"I'll be home in a day or two. Well before your wedding feast," he assured with a smile.

Hem took a fortifying breath. Every reminder was like a punch to the stomach—sometimes soft like a feather pillow and sometimes hard, knocking the wind out of her.

"You alright?" Kíli asked.

"Fine," she said, smiling at him. "It'll be nice to go home, sleep in my own bed."

"For now," Kíli replied, quick to the punch.

Right—she would sleep in Thorin's bed by the end of the week. Her admonishing glare did not muster the same chill it usually did because Kíli frowned back at her.

"You haven't . . . changed your mind, have you?"

"As if I could," Hem huffed in a humourless chuckle. Who would—or could—cancel a royal wedding?

"But you haven't, have you?" he stressed.

"No, no. It's just . . ." She searched for the words, searched her feelings. "Thorin was different last time I saw him. Colder somehow, like he was vexed—more than usual."

"Well, there was that time when this thing happened—you know, when you could've died—remember that thing?" Kíli said with a lopsided smile. "After all the time and energy he invested in your safety, he might have gotten a wee bit upset at the news."

Strangely enough, Kíli had a point there. She and Thorin had a serious talk about security, and not even two days later, she almost got herself killed—not just taking risks but properly killed.

"You're probably right." She sighed. Things would hopefully go back to normal soon. Then again, what was normal about her upcoming marriage? "Everythin' will be sorted," she said to calm herself as well as Kíli.

Then he smirked. "You'll give my regards to your betrothed, won't you?" He made an attempt at ruffling her hair, but she managed to duck and swat him away.

"Give over," he hissed at him but not without a warmth in her chest at his familiar teasing. "Go on with you. Your chair's missin' your lazy arse."

"I'm allowed to sit down. Doesn't make me lazy," he shot back, affronted. "And I'm a hundred years old—give me a break."
"Gettin' older, but your cracks are not gettin' wiser," she countered just as they reached the fork in the road that would separate them.

"See you soon, Auntie Hemmy," he called out as he turned onto a side lane.

Hemery, Bror, and the remaining Iron Wolves travelled to Erebor by boat up the river, then on horseback when the ground rose up to the mountain, with one carriage for their trunks of clothes and equipment.

There was no one to meet her at the ante-room this time, but she noticed that several people, most she did not know, nodded to her in greeting as she passed through the entrance and moved up the stairs. Surprised, she nodded back.

When she arrived on the third floor of the south wing, she was greeted by loud voices but not aimed at her. Shocked by their vehemence, she stopped.

"Go on, consult your brother—I care not. In fact, have him take your place. Perhaps then I'll be privileged to negotiate with someone who knows what they're talking about."

That was Thorin, Hem recognised.

From the entrance to Fíli's study, Dwalin was storming out, letting the door slam open against the stone wall.

"This insult will not stand unanswered," he bellowed back. "If ye'll have yer way this time, M'lord," he added the title scathingly, "ye'll have it over my rotten carcass."

Hem knew Dwalin tended to be dramatic when stirred, and she knew they were old friends—very old friends—but she had never heard him, or anyone else, yell at King Thorin. It was disconcerting, to say the least.

"Dwa?" she questioned softly, catching his attention.

He turned to her, his expression hard as he reined in his temper. For brief moment, he regarded her before he stomped away down the hall from which she had come, impatiently holding his hand up to stop any communication as he passed.

To Hem's bemusement, her sister emerged from the room as well. On quick feet, Hanah paused to kiss Hem's cheek, only mildly surprised to see her, before going after Dwalin.

"I'll talk to him," Hanah said, hushed and hurried. "Don't worry. It's nothin'."

The uncomfortable smile on Hanah's face spoke to the contrary, but Hem let her go, watching her disappear down the hall.

Approaching the doorway, Hem peered inside. Fíli's and Thorin's shapes moved in the room beyond the study, conversing tensely.

"—it will not aid your cause, Uncle. You must hear him out."

"I must do no such thing," came the king's obstinate reply.

"You must, and you will because Hanah refuses to proceed without him," Fíli spoke with
determination. "You cannot ignore him, and you cannot allow him to agitate you thusly."

"How?" Thorin barked in frustration. "By Mahal's blood, tell me how?"

Fíli kept his voice low and steady, obviously trying to soothe him. "Never speak to him alone about this matter. Whatever they demand, insist on more. I'll produce the documents needed, and for my sake, for all our sake's, say and do nothing—" He broke off, suddenly looking up at the door, noticing Hemery there.

At Fíli's abrupt silence, Thorin also turned to see her. First mild surprise on his face, then cool withdrawal of emotion. A distant resignation.

"Apologies," she said politely. She did not mean to eavesdrop. "The door was open."

"Right you are," Fíli said, visage blank as if unsure of her reaction. He cleared his throat. "Well, I think we're done here."

He looked at Thorin who simply leaned one hand on the back of a chair, not making any move to leave.

"I have things to do," Fíli went on. "So . . . I guess I'll just go. Even though it's my own study."

As he moved to the door, he paused, putting a hand on Hem's good shoulder.

"I'm glad you're back," he said sincerely, meeting her eye. No display of emotion, no concern over her arm in its sling, no worry or affection, but she knew he was truthful.

"Me too," she said, nodding at him in kind.

He squeezed her shoulder one last time before letting go, leaving her in the doorway.

Focusing on Thorin, she found him watching her. After a moment of silence, she lifted her good hand in expectation.

"So?" she said, aimlessly dropping the hand. "What is it this time?"

His demeanor was so guarded that she almost did not think he would reply, but he did.

"An old warmaster speaking out of turn," he explained vaguely and looked down with a sigh. "And a foolish king rising to the bait."

"That all?" she said, feeling herself smile. "I thought we might be on brink of war, the way you two were goin' on."

He looked back, a familiar spark in his steely gaze. "Kingdoms have been lost over less than two stubborn heads clashing."

"And you two are more hard headed than most. What could possibly be so important that you would step foot in the same room for a third time in less than one month?" she asked casually, but her curiosity was blatant.

"Simply planning the day of the ceremony," he replied matter of factly.

Of course, she should have known preparations were underway, but she herself had not heard a word about it until now. At Hem's clear astonishment, Thorin continued quickly.
"Since you have been occupied elsewhere, I requested your sister's input in your place, but she
would not contribute without consulting Dwalin. So . . ." He drummed his fingers on the chair.
"Hence the ruffled feathers."

Ruffled feathers. An understatement, to say the least, about the earlier display of anger.

"Hopefully, there's no need for further altercations now that I can speak for myself," she said.
"Dwalin needs no part in it."

"Mmh," he merely grunted in reply, noncommittal. Out of aggravation towards Dwalin or reluctant
agreement with her, Hem did not know.

Averting his eyes, he moved towards her but without the apparent intention to stop. Her hand shot
out as he passed, catching his. He stopped then, squeezing her hand in turn.

"Are you cross with me?" she asked.

His eyes cut to her.

"Whyever would I be cross with you?"

She shrugged, unable to find the right words to express her guilt and regret over . . . the incident.
But she had no time to compose an excuse because he continued to speak.

"I could not possibly be cross with you for fulfilling what you believed was your duty. However, I
could resent your blatant disregard for your safety and others'. Dismiss your conduct as negligent
and your reason as flawed."

She looked down in embarrassment and tried to slip out of his grip, but he held fast to her hand, his
voice tightening.

"But this would be incongruent with the sanity and quality of mind I know you to possess," he went on. "Now, I am willing to disregard any lapses in judgement—"

Her eyes flew to his, no doubt flashing with indignation, but she held her tongue. As much as she
herself might question the choices she had made in the last few weeks, it did not mean she enjoyed
the words being spoken out loud.

"—as an adverse effect of your unusual situation. And I must not forget my own responsibility in
the affair, so . . ."

His eyes softened, as if by the exhaustion he often revealed in her presence, and he released her
hand as well as her gaze.

"I wish to move past this, conquer the obstacles of the last couple of months, and beg you to return
to your old, sound self, for I fear what would become of this—of you—if you do not."

Silence stretched between them. Hemery's eyes stung.

"I tried . . ." she offered, pathetically.

"You can do better," he countered, continuing on his way out, away from her.

Hem felt daunted by the struggle she could see before her, of returning to their old intimacy. It
seemed to be a steep uphill angle and against the wind. Had it been so long ago that she had felt the
warmth of his hands and the tenderness of his lips on her bare skin?
"Thorin," she called out before he disappeared.

He paused by the door, looking at her over his shoulder.

"I kept my word," she said, her chin high. "I came back."

He regarded her a moment. "Have you, indeed?" he asked, but did not wait for an answer.
Hemery had dinner alone with Hanah and Hiili that night. 'Too busy' was the reply given when she asked Hanah about the others' mealtimes. She was quite happy with that. The calm was only interrupted by Hiili and her questions about Esgaroth which were welcome distractions. And Hem preferred to not have anyone witness how Hanah helped cut her meat. Hem was free of the sling but her bad arm would still not cooperate. She could not lift it and hold onto anything without a severe ache in her shoulder.

After dinner, Hiili was sent to bed, and Hemery sat in Hanah's parlour.

"Thanks for everythin',' Hem said when Hanah filled her cup with hot water from the kettle.

"It's just tea," Hanah dismissed, pouring her own.

"No, I mean, I'm grateful for all your support. I really appreciate you steppin' in and helpin' with the preparations while I've been gone."

"Oh, no." Hanah shook her head and her spoon from side to side. "I haven't touched a thing. Dis is doin' all of it."

"Then what was all that about?" Hem asked pointedly, motioning to the door and the corridor beyond where Dwalin had stormed off earlier.

"Well, after the practical details of livin' arrangements and extended privileges, security and what not, there was the matter of your uhm . . . allowance."

Hem's eyebrows rose. "My what?"

"Aye. Apparently, I'm supposed to discuss it with Thorin, as your only livin' family member. Somethin' about . . . protectin' your interests or somethin'. Now, you know I'd rather not have any part in this deal, so I thought it best to ask Dwalin's opinion—though that might have been a mistake," she added, looking down at her cup. "But accordin' to Dis and Dwalin, you'll have your own annual income when you're married. It's not like you should be forced to go ask the king for pocket money every time you want to go to the market."

"But I earn my own coin," Hem argued, bemused. "Why would I need—"

"It's not even close to what you're due." Hanah stilled and placed a hand on her arm, gripping tightly to halt her train of thought. When she spoke, her voice was grave to the point of almost alarming Hem. "Dwalin claims you should not receive less that one thousand five hundred gold pieces per annum."

"Peh—" Hem choked on her tea.

Hanah nodded. "Per annum."

Hemery could never dream of making that much as a leather smith even if she lived as long as a dwarf. She could never even dream of asking that kind of amount. No wonder there had been words exchanged.

"And . . . " Hem managed to find something resembling her voice. "I take it Thorin refused since . . ." She motioned again to the door and the corridor beyond.
Hanah let her go, shrugged, and stirred her tea. "We never got that far. Dwalin made his proposal a bit too blunt, you could say. Thorin made a snide remark, and Dwalin took it . . . badly, as if the king was mockin' him and therefore also you and me. After that, there was no goin' back."

"But that's ridiculous," Hem said automatically. "Why would I ask for that much? I don't need even a tenth of that sum."

Hanah nodded thoughtfully. "I admit I was shocked when I first heard it, too, but then I talked to Sethie about it. It makes sense when you think about it."

"One thousand five hundred gold pieces?" Hem repeated.

"With that you can hire your own people, not dependin' on the king or the council to provide you with guards or servants. You can keep your own horses. You can buy land, if you want," Hanah offered with a most uncommon exuberance. "You could buy the tanner's place in Esgaroth, you remember, where the workers are so poorly treated. You could get involved in the charities with Sigrid. You could help people, like you always talked about."

It sounded nice when spoken like that, but it was overwhelming.

"You know, when I said that, I mostly meant just you and Híli," Hem amended.

"What about all your work for the school?"

"That was so that Híli could have a good education without havin' to be sent off. Not just for her to learn readin' and writin' but for her to be good at it and see that there are other values to life than diggin' and buildin' in stone. So she could see that everythin' is part of a cultural system through which she can learn about people, their motivations and their weaknesses. So she could become the best queen she can be when it's her time."

"And you're still helpin' her do all that," Hanah emphasised. "You'd set an example for her. How welcome do you think she actually feels when all she sees in that council room are old, moldy dwarrows? But to see you as queen while she's growin' up—I could think of no one better to guide her."

Hemery was not so sure about that. She had always seen Hanah as the most admirable person she had ever met. True, Hanah did not have ambition or high ideals, but she also did not cause as much trouble for herself as Hem did. Not only had Hanah taken responsibility for her own life when Father died, she had also raised Hemery, comforted her and kept her safe. And Hanah had survived more perils alone at eighteen than Hem would have known what to do with.

Hem had been present when Hanah dropped Maaret's body in the river, but Hem never learned exactly what had happened that night. She suspected there were many things about their early years at Erebor that Hanah never spoke of in order to not frighten Hem. She could only pray to be blessed with half of Hanah's strength.

"You sell yourself short," Hem said.

"No, you are if you're marryin' a king for less than a thousand gold pieces a year," Hanah said, smiling. "Or so I'm told."

"Alright, I trust you and Dwalin." Hemery thought a moment. "But will you finish this business with Thorin? I'm not comfortable askin' him for gold."

Hanah smiled. "Lucky for us, Dwalin is very comfortable with it."
The next morning, Bror followed Hemery dutifully to Balin's study. She had to admit that all her troubles with guards in the last month had proved to her that Bror was one of the better ones—in temper as well as vigilance. He never argued with her, though he sometimes refused to oblige her. He never gave her a reason to doubt his loyalty, though she knew he foremost answered to Thorin. And he rarely voiced his opinion, though she sometimes wished he would. He just followed her, a silent companion in every venture everywhere.

And he had not had a day off in over a week. This suspension nonsense with Raín and Vannur had to stop.

"You received my report?" Hemery asked Balin when he invited her in.

"Aye, I did." He motioned for her to sit in front of his desk, but she was too restless. When she did not sit, neither did he. "But I would like to hear it in your own voice," he asked patiently.

"Do our accounts differ in terms of action or consequences?"

"Well, not as such. Ye see, there are a number of aspects to take into consideration when undertaking an inquiry such as this—"

"But if we all say the same thing, then surely you should be able to ascertain whether misdeeds have occurred? I do not intend to accuse anyone of harm against me or demand recompense, so why drag this out more than it already has been?"

"As I said, Miss Hemery, there are always foundations upon which circumstances are built. Misfortune and accidents are rarely isolated events. Experience has taught me to investigate more thorough than simply asking what happened and when." He produced a stack of parchment—much thicker than she would have expected from the testimonies and reports of six people—from a nearby shelf and placed it heavily on his desk. "Ye'd be surprised by the results."

Lord Balin's calm was strangely assuring and frustrating all at once. Hemery sat finally, and he followed suit.

"Why don't ye start at the beginning?"

Hem cast her mind back to the night of the incident. "Uhm, I was awakened by Raín at my door, at my room in The Galley."

Balin surprised her by interrupting immediately. "I beg yer pardon," he said with a small smile. "I meant, when ye first met Lieutenant Raín and Captain Vannur."

"Oh." Hem paused, bewildered. "Raín was assigned to me last summer, when I came home from Tirith, but I didn't speak to her until half a year later."

"Do ye get along? Any disputes or dislikes in any way?"

"We get along fine. She doesn't speak much at all. Except . . ."

"Yes?"

Hem cursed herself for allowing her trust in Balin let her tongue loosen thoughtlessly. He was, after all, the one to decide Raín's and Vannur's fates. She could not let him believe she was unhappy with either of them or give him reason to think they were disloyal to Erebor. However, she did not want to tell him of intimate conversations meant for only four ears, either.
She sighed before speaking. "Last week, she was worried about my work and about Beren. She encouraged me to not give up and to stay true to the path I have chosen for myself. That was the first and only time we've ever talked alone. That and when she carried me to The Galley after . . . the blast."

Balin nodded then, clearly understanding that Hem was paraphrasing Raín, and he did not press for more details. He did, however, make a note in a document before him.

"And Vannur?" he prodded.

Hem told him how Vannur had been assigned to her during their stay in Blackwater. When Balin asked about the reason for the sudden shift in responsibilities, Hem found she had trouble with her recollection—she felt only a pit of uncertainty and fear where concrete memory should have been.

"You'll have to ask King Thorin," she answered coolly. "I think he got worried when we got there. Things were perhaps worse than he anticipated and tried to compensate for the lack of safety. I don't know," she said honestly. "He didn't want me there in the first place."

Then she talked about the night when Vannur saved her from the orcs and how she took charge of every situation they were placed in, how she aided and advised Hem, whether asked for it or not, and how safe Hem felt in Vannur's, Raín's, and Bror's presence after the incident.

She went on to tell him specifically about the night when Raín came knocking at her door, only to be interrupted again.

"How long had you been sleeping?"

"Well, not long." She had already been awake, forced to insomnia by her nightmares. "An hour, perhaps. What does that have to do with anythin?"

"Sleeplessness causes the mind to function at a lesser rate. It may cause irritability and deficient reasoning, even madness if allowed to spread over days or weeks. Have ye had difficulty sleeping before this instance?"

Hemery hesitated in her reply. "I wake sometimes at night, but nothin' to disturb my days."

Balin made a small note. Hem could not see what. "Please, continue."

"Raín knocked on the door," she went on, more careful now of what she said—mindful of his scrutiny. "She said Lida was there to speak to me. That it was important."

"Was the door open when she said this?"

Hem thought about it a moment. "No, I had not told her to come in."

"I see."

"See what?" Hem asked, curious.

He did not reply but instead asked, "Had Raín met Lida before?"

"I don't think so. I mean, I'm not with her every hour of the day."

"How do ye think Raín recognised Lida?"

"The day guard probably told her of the uthrab," Hem said, bitterly.
Balin watched her, as if waiting for her to go on.

"The other guards are very distrustful of Lida, as you may have guessed, and would not have neglected to pass on any information about possible threats to my person." She sat back, crossing her legs. "I can imagine as much," she added, admitting that this was merely her own speculation.

Thus, the morning crept on slowly. Balin would ask her to expand on assumptions and theories of her own, as well as question every generalisation and shortcut she made in her story. By noon, they had discussed the events so many times over that Hem hardly knew what was real anymore.

"How many ways can I say it?" Hem groaned, rubbing at her face. "It was my fault people got hurt. I decided to go to the storehouse without Kíli or Bain's soldiers. I let Lida roam free on the docks. It was my fault—no one else's. Can you please tell me Raín and Vannur won't be held accountable for the incident, nor any of the Wolves?" She leaned forward, resting her good elbow on the edge of Balin's desk.

He watched her patiently as ever, his hands folded but tapping his quill softly on the parchment, as if in thought.

"We can stop now, if ye wish," he said. "I have enough to conclude my own report. I will also write up a recommendation for measures to be made. Their commander in chief will decide on the matter."

"King Thorin." Hem shook her head dejectedly, worn and weary. "But he said you would decide."

Balin smiled carefully. "He is king. He may overrule any decision of mine. Have been known to do so frequently, in fact."

Hem sat back. She needed to eat something soon; hunger was probably the reason she felt so tired.

"When?" she asked.

"Well, I will finish this afternoon. There'll be some paperwork to sign, seal, and archive . . . And then the notifications and notary . . . processing and . . ." Balin listed, a half-mumble more to himself than to her.

"Just give me a day," she snapped. "Any day."

"Oh, aye, three days at most," he settled, unfazed. "Whatever the decision, it will be put into practice within three days."

"Good," she said, rising.

"Miss Hemery," he voiced, halting her before she reached the door. He peered at her over his spectacles. "I'll make sure it's placed at the top of his pile."

"Gratitude, m'lord," she said, feeling a smile make its way to her face.

"After all, it's in his best interest that the matter be dealt with swiftly. If I were him, I wouldn't provoke a lady just days before I was to wed her," he added with a warm chuckle.

Hem's smile turned into a laugh. "You are very wise, m'lord."

That very same night, upon leaving the dining room, Hemery noticed Raín had relieved Bror for the night shift during her dinner. Hem halted outside the door.
"You're back." Balin had indeed made quick work of that report, she mused.

"Aye, Miss."

"Good."

Nonplussed, Hem simply began the walk to her chambers with Raín following as usual. But what was not usual was Hem's feeling that she was rudely ignoring Raín by keeping her back to her. Hem had not felt that in a long time. She did not like the idea that she had become so accustomed to servants and guards following her.

"May I walk beside you?" Hem asked after a moment.

Raín hesitated—in her flitting gaze, never in her stance—before answering. "If you wish."

Hem matched her pace with Raín's, walking on.

"I apologise for any harm this . . . suspension of your duties may have caused," Hem said.

Silenced stretched.

"It happens," Raín replied tersely.

"Oh?" Hem genuinely had no idea. Perhaps it was a small comfort. Unless Raín was belittling the event, which dwarves were prone to do when dealing with embarrassment. "Well, in any case. Apologies. And I can't tell you the gratitude I feel for all you did for me."

Raín's eyes cut to her at that but merely nodded in reply.

"Have there been any measures taken?" Hem asked, curious about the hasty decision. "If I may ask?"

Raín was silent so long that Hem began thinking the worst. What if Raín and Vannur were being punished after all, despite that Raín had seemingly been returned to regular duty? What if she was being sent away shortly? Or worse, what if she were to be stuck as Hemery's guard for the rest of her life, never advancing, never changing, ever walking the night shift up and down those cold corridors?

"They offered me a position with the Iron Wolves," Raín said.

"Really?" Hem said slowly, confused but nodding. "Uhm . . . Congratulations."

"I refused."

Hem was stunned. "What? Why? I understand it's a great honour to join their ranks."

Raín was again silent a moment before replying, "Aye, Miss. It is a great honour."

"Then why would you turn it down?" Hem thought most dwarves would jump at the opportunity to raise themselves.

"As I said before, Miss—I like it here."

"But—"

"I like the quiet," Raín dared to interrupt, glancing at Hem again.
Right, Raín's choice of work was her business. Hem only nodded and refrained from asking anymore questions. And if she was gleeful that Raín preferred to work with her rather than the prestigious Wolves, she did not let it show. They continued on their way through the halls together in grateful silence—one more grateful, the other more silent.

The next day, Vannur was also present at the guard change. Like Raín, she did not divulge any details about the suspension other than that she was cleared along with Raín and the Wolves who had been with them on that night. But when Hemery thanked her, she protested.

"Don't thank me, m'lady," Vannur said. "Just let me preform my duty." As she had asked once before in Esgaroth.

Hem caught the hint and felt her cheeks grow hotter. It was a strange thing to feel berated and at the same time flattered that these excellent guards wished to work with her still. Sure, they had initially been assigned to her, but Hem was confident that at least Vannur could easily have requested another post, especially after the humiliation that Hemery had put them all through with the suspension.

"Your testimony was thanks enough," Vannur added. "You took blame that should have been on me, though you didn't have to. Would have been easy to let the lords believe the casualties and the injuries had been our fault."

The incident had been more complicated than that, but when it came to identifying scapegoats, Balin would have had no problem with targeting single individuals if he thought it necessary.

"We all know it was my idea. Even Balin, who was not there, could have had a bloody guess at it."

"Aye, Miss. But you are still a civilian. Security is not your responsibility."

"Well, it'll have to be from now on, won't it?" Hem argued.

Vannur tilted her head in reluctant agreement. But no more was spoken on the subject, so Hem was glad to put it at the back of her mind. Not that she had a choice. With the upcoming wedding, she had no time or capacity to think much of anything.

The days passed quickly for Hemery by helping Dis with planning inconsequential details like food and seating arrangements for the ceremony, and then suddenly, it was the eve before she was to wed King Thorin. As Hanah had assured her, the practical matters of living arrangements and livelihoods had been taken care of, and her rooms had been stripped of her belongings, most packed away to be moved in the morning, as if she was being banished from her home. Her chambers would be given to Híli now, still close to the girl's parents but with a clear line of independence. Híli had been torn about the anticipation of her new rooms, bigger and all to herself, and the sad parting with her aunt. Hem had to remind herself that she was only moving down the hall.

Everything was changing. By that small shift in location from one end of the south wing to the other, she would turn her whole existence upside down. But then again, that had already happened several times over. She had survived those shifts. She would survive this too. This was what she wanted—to marry Thorin.

And it was what he wanted too, was it not?

Dis looked up from her desk as the door opened.
"She won't wear the gold," Sethie informed without even a greeting.

It was late, and Dis still had work to do since she had put aside her regular duties for the sake of planning the most rushed wedding she had ever had the misfortune to witness. Aside from her own, of course, but that thought was best left alone.

"She . . . will not wear it?" Dis questioned to clarify that she had heard Sethie correctly. Dis really hoped she had not.

Sethie smiled thinly in sympathy.

"I think it's just nerves getting in the way. She's starting to get cold feet, so outwardly she'll doubt every practical detail 'cause it's easier than dealing with the source."

"I knew this would happen," Dis said in irritation. "If only he'd taken more time to—" She stopped herself, sighing. No use banging the I told you so-drum at this point. "But, of course, I don't have to agree with my brother at every turn—I just have to make it work. He knows what he's doing."

"Except when he doesn't," Sethie countered mildly, tilting her head.

Dis cracked a smile.

"What does Hanah say?" she asked.

"She made it clear from the start that she wasn't going to meddle in the practical aspects of the ceremony. She neither knows nor cares particularly about traditions and rituals. That being said, she'll side with her sister, no matter what. If Hemery doesn't want to wear the gold, Hanah won't persuade her."

"And let me guess," Dis said, pushing her hair back and rubbing her scalp tiredly, "you will be no help in this matter, either?"

Sethie shrugged. "I'm the last person to advice her on proper appearances and conventions, as you well know." She gave Dis a meaningful look. "Besides, I've never been married."

Wiping her quill of excess ink, Dis returned the look. She understood Sethie's meaning perfectly.

"Does Thorin know of her protests?"

"Not yet." Sethie's eyebrow rose as if to say it was only a matter of time.

Dis closed the lid of the ink well with a flick of her finger. Then she stood. "Very well. I'll speak with her." Her work would have to wait.

On Dis's knock, Hemery opened her door quickly considering the late hour. Not unusual for someone who were most certainly wide awake and worrying a hole in the floor with restless anticipation for the next day. Dis was not surprised. Hem, however, was very much so.

"Lady Dis," she greeted respectfully when she opened the door. "Please, come in."

"How are you?" Dis asked, taking in Hem's jittery hands and jerky, stressed movements. "Everything in order?"

"Oh, aye. It's fine. All's settled. No complications, really. I mean, it'll be over within an hour, right? No need to turn oneself into knots."
Hem's rambling suggested nerves, just like Sethie warned.

"Just memorise a few lines and recite them at the correct moment," Hem tried to trivialise. "What could go wrong?"

It seemed uncertain whether she believed that herself.

"I have personally overseen all the preparations," Dis said. "I assure you, everything will run smoothly as long as you do your part."

Hem's face fell. Obviously, she knew what Dis alluded to.

"Why will you not wear what's been made for you?" Dis asked patiently.

Hemery suddenly looked miserable, her brow crumbling into sad creases.

"There are at least a thousand gold pieces on that thing," she hissed in a whisper and pointed to the small chest on the table, as if not saying it out loud would make the refused gold less of an insult to the Durins. "Not to mention the bracelets and the anklets, the rings, and the belt. I'll look ridiculous, and I'll sound even worse when I move. It's too much. I can barely lift that box with my bare hands."

Dis tried to keep her smile kind and understanding.

"It's simply . . ." She drew a breath, searching for the right words. "A symbol of prosperity."

"Erebor's prosperity, perhaps," Hem protested. "The king's wealth, certainly. And the end of my life as I know it, most decidedly."

Dis frowned. "I know this is a big step, and I know you know that. You're no fool—you have known it all along."

"I know," Hem admitted, tossing her hands up, helplessly. "But if I put on that . . . costume, it will be that much more real. I'll be posin' as the king's property, as somethin' to be decorated for someone's else's viewin' pleasure. It wasn't supposed to be like this. It's not me."

Dis shook her head, raising her hands to soothe Hem's tense shoulders.

"No, no, no, dearest lass. It's not like that. It is you. It is yours."

"What?" Hem frowned.

"The gold is yours," Dis explained. "It's your wedding gift. It's your prosperity—your property—to show the world that only one person is worthy of your hand. The one you allowed to gift you this treasure, the one from whom you accepted this token of respect, loyalty, and trust. Common law dictates that you may keep this gold no matter what happens, whether you complete the marriage ceremony or not, whether you choose to stay with your partner or not. This is to ensure that the woman may break with her husband in case of an abusive or otherwise destructive relationship.

"However, if he would leave you, he must pay twice this sum in order to be separated and financially relieved from his commitment. This is naturally to ensure you of your husband's loyalty and devotion, since the woman may be indisposed with childcare for many years and therefore deprived of her ability to earn a wage. The greater the gift, the greater his pledge of faithfulness."

Hem listened raptly. "But . . . what if the man is poor? Should the capacity of one's heart be
determined by one's pocket book?" She clearly did not like this marital theory.

"Have you ever seen a poor man under our rule?" Dis challenged.

Hem thought a moment. "Not in Erebor, no," she admitted. "Can't say that I have. But to be fair, I spend most of my time with royalty," she added cynically.

"There are naturally those who have fallen ill or have been hurt or otherwise incapable of making a living, but they are relatively few. Of those, even fewer are married, since the majority of dwarves do not pursue matrimonial interests. In Erebor, everyone has a function. Poverty indicates material obstacles or idleness. The first is more easily remedied than the second. And an idle dwarf ought not to exist, much less be married."

Dis could tell that Hem still was not convinced.

"I grant you," Dis went on, "it is an old tradition, rarely enforced. But when a king marries, once in a hundred years or so, it is a valuable ceremony that sets the standard for all others. A symbol that the union is an honour—for both parties—to enter into. And not one to enter lightly."

Hemery remained thoughtful but did not challenge it further.

"Why the anklets, though?" she asked instead, focusing perhaps on a point of discomfort rather than morality. "They won't be visible beneath the dress, anyway."

"You'll know they're there. And judging by their weight, your gait will testify to their presence." Dis paused. "And . . . it's supposed to be pleasurable to wear them—and for your husband to see them—when you undress on the wedding night." Dis laughed, amused by Hem's nonplussed, blushing face. "Personally, I think it's just a stigma—anticipation toward a specific moment built up over time that can never live up to expectations."

It looked like Hem wanted to ask more, but she did not.

"Will you try it on, at least?" Dis requested, letting hope colour her tone.

Hem smiled tensely. "Alright."

Dis helped her with all the fastenings and made sure all the fabric and metal fell as they were supposed to. The basic dress was dark red, covered in part by a sheer open tunic that traced the floor, a bit too long in the back for Hem's liking. This was accentuated by a wide silk fabric tying it all together at the waist, from below the bust to the hip, in several layers and different shades and patterns of brighter red.

A lace fabric covered Hem's head from her forehead, over the top of her head, and down her back to skim the floor. The dress was comfortable in its generous cut. Hem had not even needed a fitting, which was why she had not been faced with this particular wardrobe request sooner. It would have been better to present it to her earlier, but given the brief preparation—the gold pieces had to be custom made, after all—it could not be done.

A circle of small gold discs fused together, like a crown, kept the lace in place on her head. Gold bracelets were clasped at her wrists, wide as her palms, weighing at least two pounds each. Over the waist, a belt made of gold plates the shape and size of goose eggs rested heavily, made heavier by the chains of smaller pieces which hung like dripping, melted gold drops from the belt down to her feet on all sides.

She had a gold necklace, as well, if one could call it that, made up of flat triangles which side by
side formed a larger triangle covering her chest from shoulder to shoulder and tapering down with its tip attached to the belt. Another triangle mirrored it on her back, balancing out the weight and kept the front in place with a few rings over her shoulders.

Most of her hair would be free with only a few braids with interwoven pearls and gold beads. If Hemery could be persuaded to wear it, that is, Dis thought.

"Hm," Dis hummed in displeasure.

"What?" Hemery asked, wary.

"I've never noticed before that your ears aren't pierced. You won't be able to wear the earrings."

"Oh, calamity," Hem said sarcastically. She held up a hand, making the chains chink softly as she moved. "I refuse to mutilate myself for my weddin' day. No bloody way." Then she blanched as she realised to whom she was speaking. "Apologies, m'lady," she amended, sheepish.

Dis smiled in amusement. "That's quite alright."

Hem adjusted the necklace—or chainmail, rather—on her chest. "Bloody Mahal, this is heavy," she breathed out. "It's just—I already look like a theatrical impersonation of Yavannah or something."

Dis put her hands on Hem's shoulders from behind, making sure they locked eyes in the mirror.

"You look like a queen," she stated with no room for argument. Hem would become what Dis never would. Dis might have become queen mother some day but never supreme sovereign. However, she could not say it was a particular cause for lament on her part.

Hemery grew serious at that, straightening significantly as she regarded herself.

Dis let go of any lingering worries about Hem's cold feet. She may not have been born to it, but Hemery would take what strength she had gathered in her young years and build it into the stuff of regents, Dis was certain. Hem had proved she could handle Thorin; she could handle this.

"Did you wear this when you married?" Hem asked.

Memories flashed in Dis's mind before she answered, bitter in their distance and laced with old regrets. "Something like it," was all she offered. Not until she saw her own frozen countenance in the mirror did Dis let Hem go and moved to face her.

"I'm sure you know this—if not by your own sensibilities then by Hanah's advice, no doubt—but I'd like to voice it nonetheless," she began carefully. "This will be a genuine, legitimate union, but be aware that you need not obey Thorin as your husband, only as your king, which are two very different duties."

Hemery had once more fallen silent, listening attentively and perhaps a bit worried.

"You need not give him an heir," Dis went on. "You need not represent him in any capacity or please him in ways you are uncomfortable with."

Dis tugged at the veil, pulling it forward over Hem's shoulders as if closing it like a sheltering cloak, aimlessly adjusting the dress.

"This marriage may be merely a harmless spectacle with the people as an audience, but always put your own wellbeing first, because in the king's shadow, you will always come second in everyone's
priorities."

Hem put her hands on top of Dis's where they fidgeted with the lace, holding them still.

"Dis?" Hem said to catch her attention. "Are you worried about . . . me and the king?"

"No," she quickly replied. Dis knew Thorin cared for Hemery; she did not believe he would abuse her in any way. "Not at all. I'm reminding you of your place, that's all. You and your sister are orphans, my family the only patrons you have."

It could be debated that Dwalin also was her guardian, but Dis focused on her son being the reason for Hemery and Hanah's move to Erebor and all they had been subjected to since—good as well as bad. Hanah's financial success, Hemery's influence at court, the persecution and the danger they had faced were all consequences of actions by the Durins. Dwalin had been merely social support, while Thorin had put Hem on the spot and forced her to make all kinds of sacrifices for the good of Erebor as if she was their kin. Dis too had devoted her life to the safekeeping of their people—as Thorin himself had done on many occasions, as well as Dis's sons. Though it was the way of the world, Dis acknowledged her part in Hem's fate, if only as a complacent spectator.

"And even we who were supposed to protect you have exposed you to the vulgar business of politics. For that I can only apologise. But it could be worse, child. A lot worse."

She almost regretted this last part of her sermon; she had meant to assure Hemery, but it seemed Dis had mostly confused or even scared her. She decided to change the subject.

"You don't have to wear the anklets if you don't wish to," she said, attempting a smile.

Hem cracked a smile in return, almost rolling her eyes. "Thankin' you ever so kindly, m'lady," she jested. "Now that there's only five hundred pounds left, I'll be positively flyin' down the stairs tomorrow—probably face first, mind you."

Dis genuinely laughed at Hem's exaggeration. "So you'll wear the dress?" she asked.

"You do know that my shoulder isn't fully healed yet?" Hem pushed. "I shouldn't be carryin' heavy objects."

Dis raised expectant eyebrows at her, very similar to her brother's, only warmer.

Hem sighed in resignation. "I'll have Sethie help me into it. And not here—I'll find somewhere closer to the great hall to change so I don't strain somethin' on the way to the ceremony. Don't want my first impression as queen to be a limpin' carnival clown."

Sleep would not come. Hemery lay in bed, eyes closed, willing herself to slip away into oblivion. But she was both terrified of the day to come and unwilling to enter the dreams she was now assaulted by every night. They were getting worse, but she hoped with all her being that it was only nerves before the morrow. After the wedding, they would surely go away.

Therefore, when the knock sounded through her empty rooms, Hem sprung from her bed, eager to distract herself from her own thoughts and to see he whom she was certain had come to see her. She had not allowed herself to anticipate a visit tonight, but secretly, she hoped he would come.

With a long, knitted sweater over her night dress, she opened her door.

"Am I disturbing you?" Thorin asked politely.
"I couldn't sleep," she answered, opening the door further to let him in. He did not move, but he did not speak either. This worried Hem. "Is somethin' wrong?"

"I . . ." he began. "I merely wished to make sure you were still here."

"Of course I'm still here." She frowned. Did he think she would run away? Just leave without notice?

"And tomorrow . . ."

"I'll still be here tomorrow." Her fatigue bled into her tone, making it impatient.

"Good." He nodded once. "No change then."

"We made an agreement," Hem reminded him and crossed her arms in annoyance though her shoulder still ached. She ignored the pain. "I'll not be the one to break it," she said stubbornly. His mouth softened into almost a smile. "I did not mean to insinuate any violation of our contract."

"Then why are you here?"

He did not reply. He did not seem sure of the answer himself.

"Thorin," she said softly, but firmly. He met her eyes steadily. "Are you sure you want me as your wife?" She tried to say it devoid of judgement, offering him a chance to speak frankly. "So much has happened since we last spoke of it. You don't really need to protect me anymore. I'd understand if—"

"As you said," he interrupted calmly, fixing her with his steel gaze. "We have an agreement. I have no wish to break it more than you."

"Good," she said, though frowning again in vexation at his vague reply. "You should go to bed now, Sire. You have big day ahead of you," she dismissed teasingly. But when she moved to close the door, he caught her hand.

Without breaking eye contact, he raised her hand to his lips, kissing it. It was a small kiss that warmed her belly much more than it should.

"Till tomorrow," he said before releasing her.
Hemery was not permitted to touch anything all day. Hanah, Sethie, and Híli made sure she was bathed, fed, and primmed without her having to lift a finger. Normally, this would have incensed Hem, but their fussing and chatter drowned out most thoughts and worries, so she welcomed it.

"Are these shackles?" Híli asked curiously.

Hem cast a glance in her direction. Sitting on a chair with her skirt hiked up to her knees, Híli watched her outstretched feet and the golden anklets swinging dangerously low on her small feet.

"Yes," Hem said at the same time as Sethie said, "No. Put those back, right now." Sethie waved her hand at the child, as if the motion would magically compel her.

"You can have them 'cause I'm not wearin' them," Hem said lazily from the bath tub where she lay submerged with her head and hands above the surface, a foot resting on the edge.

Híli sheepishly placed the pieces back onto the table. "Nah, they're too big anyway."

"Don't be too eager to grow up," Hanah told her daughter from where she carefully ironed Hem's silk dress. "You'll have your own gold soon enough."

Between having her nails cut, cleaned, and polished to a high sheen, to having her hair washed, combed, trimmed, and braided, and to having her skin scrubbed, dried, creamed, and pinched to glow rosily in what Sethie called a 'wholesome' way, Hem could not move except when prompted by the other women to do so. This was also strangely comforting, since it removed Hem's responsibility in her own appearance. To strengthen this feeling of security, she avoided catching her reflection in any looking glass to minimise the risk of self-scrutiny.

Dis had food brought, special delicacies prepared for the occasion, which Híli fed to Hem in small bites through the day. Fruit pastries, nuts, bread, cheese, honeyed ham, custard tarts, meat pies, and sweet tea. From time to time, Hanah and Hemery sang together, and Hem felt herself relax, sitting in her old room, watching the sunlight slide over the walls in ripples caused by the thick glass from the windows, as if it was filtered through water.

Late in the afternoon, Sethie poured Hemery wine before helping her dress. It might colour her lips
purple, but Hemery did not care. It calmed her nerves.

When Sethie made the final touches to the dress, Hem hissed in pain. "My hair is stuck in the chains."

Though the gold rested between her dress and the sheer tunic, specifically to protect furniture and her person from any damage the coarse gold could evoke, strands of hair made its way down to wrap around the hinges and clasps that held the pieces together, tugging mercilessly on Hem's scalp.

"Delicate like a porcelain doll," Sethie muttered while trying to untangle her. Finally, she had to pull the fragile hair free from the necklace when the strain caused involuntary tears to well in Hem's eyes. "I'll have to braid it all. We can't have a crying bride before the king. Needn't further proof of his tyranny."

"Seth," Hem admonished but chuckled nonetheless. "I'm slave to none but your brutal hands."

Ordinarily, the future husband would meet his wife at the residence in which they would live, and they would enter together. However, Thorin was no ordinary dwarf. Therefore, Hemery would meet him in the throne room, in the heart of his stronghold, in front of hundreds of witnesses, out of respect for the king.

They made their way to the great hall by smaller side paths seldom seen by Hem. When they stood before the doors to the throne room, Sethie took the wine from Hem's hand and disappeared with Híli, leaving Hemery with Hanah and their guards. Hem heard the birds of spring echo from the domed ceiling in the entrance hall where they flittered between balconies. The silence belied the presence on the other side of those doors.

After a moment, music sifted through the wood. Harps, flutes, horns, and drums in a simple but enchanting melody. It was time.

The doors opened slowly to reveal the splendor of the throne room. The light was dimmer than usual, except for the plateau at the far end where Thorin sat which was lit by dozens of lanterns—hanging from the ceiling as well as from the walls. Along the walls above the galleries on each side of the path burned shallow basins of oil in clear, serene, high flames. The coats of arms, colours, and crests of the noble Ereborian families decorated the banners hanging from the ceiling and the tapestries along the walls, greatest of which was the sign of Durin above the tall, polished thrones of black marble.

The floor was packed with people, as were the balconies, but Hem was too nervous to register their faces. She only took in the narrow path before her. She had never noticed how far it was between the doors and the thrones, until now.

"Just say the word," Hanah spoke in a hushed voice. "And we'll call the whole thing off. Dwalin and I'll sort it."

Hem glanced at her sister and burst out laughing. Hanah smiled back.

"Gratitude," Hem replied, squeezing her hand briefly.

They schooled their expressions and turned back towards the entrance which they were expected to walk through several moments ago.

"All jestin' aside," Hanah whispered to Hem's left. "Just say the word."
With that assurance fresh in her mind, Hemery took her first step. She was almost glad of the weight of her costume now, for it helped her measure her paces and not rush, keeping her chin high and her back straight like Dwalin taught her long ago. She knew already that her shoulder would be killing her at the end of the night. That ache, too, helped keep her grounded.

She had not seen Thorin in his crown for a long time. It jarred her to see him in his formal robes and finery, gold around his neck and jewels on his knuckles. The look in his eyes, when she came close enough to make it out, was the same cool detachment he always wore in public, but there was a softness to his lips, half hidden beneath his beard, that spoke of contentment. Whether this ghost of a smile was produced by amusement at seeing her so uncomfortable or by genuine pride at the vision of his future wife, Hem could not say.

Dís, Fíli, Kíli, Balin, and several of the founding fathers of new Erebor stood in a line on the right side of the throne, guards behind them. On the left stood Dwalin with Sethie and Híli next to him. His countenance was grim but not angry. It seemed he had put on a formal coat—one of those that Hanah had unknowingly made for him and his brethren ten years ago—dark grey with red jasper, and even combed his beard for the occasion. Hem saw it as a victory.

When Hemery arrived at the steps before the throne, Thorin rose and came forward, holding out his hand for her to take. All stilled, and the music stopped.

Thorin spoke.

"You are welcome to enter my home, My Lady. Join me, share it, in blood and stone, in life until death, now and forever." His words were said in his kingly baritone, the one were his word travelled to every corner of his kingdom, were his word was law. The voice he used before an audience, for his spectators. But his eyes never left hers as he gazed down where she stood at the foot of the steps.

Then Hemery answered with the words she had learnt, relaxing her throat to speak clearly but softly, and it surprised her how far her lungs could carry her voice in the stone hall. "I will join you, My Lord, and share your home, in blood and stone, in life until death, now and forever."

With those words, he led her up the steps until they stood on the plateau, facing each other with their audience to Hem's right. Hanah took her place next to Dwalin, while her and Hem's guards went to stand behind them in a perfect line equal to that on the other side.

Only a few hushed murmurs and unbidden coughs reached Hem from the back of the room. As her eyes wandered nervously from Thorin's calm face, to their clasped hands, and to the floor and back again, she wondered what the people whispered to each other, what their thoughts were this moment.

Through the silence, Hanah's voice suddenly cut like a blade of velvet. She was accompanied by nothing but her own echo on the stone, singing an old hymn in Khuzdul she had learned by heart. "Something about glory to the people who inherited the land of the gods, Hem was not sure, but the sentiment of reverence was clearly communicated.

As Hanah sang, Dis came forth to stand on Thorin's right, carrying a box. From inside, Thorin picked up two gold rings which he placed on each of Hem's middle fingers. The one on the left was adorned with a flat, round, dark red crystal. On the right, a dark blue of similar cut. Runes wound around the outside of the band—Hem recognised the first words from the Durin dictum.

Then Hemery mirrored his actions, picking up the two remaining rings, of the same design, from Dis's box and threading them on Thorin's middle fingers where they struggled for dominance over
neighboring rings of cruder fashion—scratched golden hexagons and blocks of uncut citrine, smoky quartz, and amethyst. The ritual was concluded with Hemery gently leaning forward and Thorin gently kissing her forehead, thus confirming their acceptance of each other as husband and wife.

As Hanah's song came to a close, a loud hollering began in the throne room; people clapped their hands, stomped their feet, laughed, and shouted hurrahs and an array of other joyous exclamations. Hemery could not help but smile herself as relief flooded her. The worst was over.

New music started, and people rearranged themselves into long lines on the floor from the doors up to the plateau. Beside Hem, servants appeared with trays larger than barrel lids covered with small cakes. The size of a small chicken egg, the cake was made up of a pastry crust, its filling a smooth paste of sugar and nuts, and topped with a tough layer of caramel made of maple syrup and cream boiled together. On Thorin's left, the servants carried trays with goblets of wine filled to the brim.

The custom, Hemery had been told, was for the wed couple to treat their guests to food and drink, as a symbol of their good fortune and good will. This held a double significance at a king's wedding where the guests were also the couple's subjects because it symbolised the fortune of the kingdom and the good will of the king and queen toward their people, their willingness to feed them like metaphorical children. She found it bewildering that this ritual was in addition to the feast which would take place shortly afterwards. It seemed that the intimacy of delivering food directly from her hand into someone else's was of special significance.

So, like a mother, Hemery handed out cakes to each and every person who came to stand before her, while Thorin handed out goblets of wine. They would incline their heads toward the guest, and the guest would bow properly at the waist with silent thanks in return. The first few people were easy; Fíli and Kíli accepted the food and drink with a flourish, Dis with grace, Híli with zeal, Sethie with amusement, Balin with refinement, and Hanah with temperance.

Dwalin refrained from partaking, presumably because he neither saw Thorin as his master nor Hemery as his mistress. The guards were also excused from any involvement this evening as they were on duty and their devotion to their masters were implied if not understood. But all other present were expected to accept their generosity.

When Sigrid approached with her father, Hem felt the first flares of a blush on her cheeks. She did not know why. Probably because neither of them were subjects of Erebor, and it felt too strange to feed a king and a princess who ruled over domains other than Erebor. But they were guests, and in their case, the purpose of the treat would be seen as general benevolence. Plus, Sigrid always enjoyed participating in dwarven customs, for some reason. Hem noticed that Bain, though present, stood back and allowed his sister and father to experience the full extent of Thorin's hospitality without him. Sigrid and Bard's actions would absolve him of any duty to show respect. All knew of the animosity between him and Thorin; it was preferred that he did not engage personally with the newlyweds tonight.

Hem did not see any dissatisfaction among the guests, at least not among those she met personally; but then again, those who might disapprove of their king's marriage to a commoner of mankind would probably not attend the ceremony, let alone line up to receive wine and cake. She had not realised how much she dreaded today for that reason until she actually could see the joy in the room and be released from her fear.

She was surprised further when not only satisfied dwarven faces met her but also elven. Four of them, Hem saw, at the back of the room—they needed no greater vantage point than simply the level of their heads above the other guests. Two blond, two brown haired, all fair and dressed in
shades of green. Hem reflected that they might be siblings for all she could tell them apart. She guessed two were women and two were men, but she was not sure.

The elves hesitated as the line of dwarves dwindled, but Hem raised her hand to them, offering a cake in the palm of her hand, beckoning them to her. They were guests, after all, and she did not want them to feel left out. Sigrid and Bard got cakes, so why not them?

Similar to a troop of guards on patrol, the elves marched confidently with their backs straight up to the bottom of the stairs before the throne, all the while glancing to the sides as if anticipating attacks. Then, with otherworldly grace and unnaturally long limbs, the foremost elf put one foot on the middle stair, bent forward his head and presented his hand to Hemery where she still held out her palm at the top of the stairs. She needed not reach far to deliver the cake into his waiting hand.

She expected Thorin to hand him a goblet, but this did not happen. Hem looked at Thorin, confused. He seemed to have no wish to quench the elf's thirst. At the corner of her eye, Hem saw Balin glare at the king and make hand gestures that were not so respectful or subtle. Hem knew Thorin did not like elves, but she was pleased to see he had enough sense to invite them anyway, as a kindness and a willingness to nurture Erebor's relationship with the Greenwood. However, she thought it twice rude of him to have them invited to this important occasion and not show them the same respect he showed others. Or perhaps Dis had handled the invitations as well; that would make more sense.

Pressing her mouth tightly in exasperation, Hem gently pried the goblet out of Thorin's hand and gave it to the elf with a smile. With the same preternatural handsomeness, he rose to his full height and backed away as swiftly as he had approached. She caught a scent from his featherlight hair, like grass in rain. Hem beckoned the remaining three elves as well, making sure each received a cake and a goblet.

"Save those for dinner," Hem recommended them as an afterthought before they returned to the crowd. The first elf bowed his head to her in acknowledgment.

Hemery let herself be led by Thorin's hand as they moved to an adjoined hall where an abundance of food was served. Swine and birds, roasted whole, lay in rows along the tables which were arranged like a horse shoe around a fire pit in the middle of the stone floor. The meat was accompanied by carrots, potatoes, pies, cheese, fresh bread, and a rich gravy based on cream and wine. Even fruit decorated the tables, though Hem had no idea where it had come from this early in the season. Barrels of wine and ale lined the walls, servants turning their taps and filling decanters in order to refill the goblets on the tables.

The guests were so many that Hemery could not clearly see the faces farthest away from her, but she noticed the elves were placed to her right, a dozen or so seats down.

Just as people were about to sit, the mood in the room high and the volume growing—talking, laughter, and music playing still—the doors opened once more to admit a party of dwarves. Hem hardly took notice before an authoritative, loud voice boomed in the hall.

"What's the meanin' of this?"

The hall fell quiet, suddenly. All regarded the newcomers. They were dressed in travel garb but no tattered robes or filthy cloaks—fine linen, velvet, thick leather, and expensive fur. The speaker, with more grey in his beard than red, stood with his hands on his belt and seemed unaffected by the tension his words created.

"Ye start the feast without me, cousin?" he went on. "Hospitality in this mountain really has gone
to the dogs."

Hemery all but gaped in astonishment. Cousin? Hem knew no cousins of Thorin's. Except Dáin. Could this be—?

"And you're late, as usual," Thorin replied, not bothering to match the dwarf's volume. "Seeing as you only arrived to voraciously sample food and wine gratis, to the great grief of my kitchen, I took the liberty of ignoring your tardiness."

The stranger laughed as he strode forward, rounding the tables to face Thorin with only an armslength separating them.

"But I always come when called," he spoke, softer now. His voice, like gravel and tar, bore witness to the smoking of plenty a pipe through the years, or shouting—or both. "Is that not so?"

Thorin regarded him with the usual level of unimpressed for a moment before closing the distance between them and embracing the bold dwarf with a smile. They clapped each other forcefully on the back, then let go.

Immediately, the dwarf's eyes moved over the congregation, settling finally on Hemery. She would be hard to miss, standing there next to Thorin in her outfit, though she wished otherwise.

"My Lady Hemery," Thorin said, "may I present Dáin Ironfoot, son of Náin, king of the Iron Hills."

Hemery was not sure what to do but did what she could; she bowed her head in as much of a respectful gesture as possible, which became only a nod in the end due to the heavy gold on her head and the fabric straining beneath.

"It's an honour, Your Highness," she said.

"The honour is mine, My Lady," Dáin protested. "I must confess, word reached me of the lass who agitated Thorin's personal guard. I'm pleased as well as surprised to meet you in these circumstances."

Hem felt heat in her face and in her gut at that. She had all but convinced herself that Vannur had forgiven her for whatever mistakes she had made. "I'm sure my infamy is greatly exaggerated—"

"Nonsense," Dáin boomed again. "I have it on good authority that you, My Lady, and no other girl of men brought a member of The Red Guard to his knees in three moves."

Somewhere behind Daín, Hem heard Kíli burst out in laughter. Was Dáin talking about Steig? That was months ago. She had hoped the few who were there had forgotten about it. Apparently not.

"It is true," Thorin unexpectedly admitted. Hem's eyes cut to him. He knew and all? "Lady Hemery is not to be underestimated," he added, meeting her eyes with a gleam in his eyes.

Mortified at his knowledge that she had allowed Steig to provoke her and consequently assaulted him, she stuttered something resembling, "You're too kind, Sire," and looked down.

"So," Dáin bark suddenly, "ye said something about voracious gluttony," he reminded Thorin, slapping his shoulder.

With that, Thorin motioned for all to take their seats. At once, the merry music started up again, people's voices and slamming of cutlery filling the air. Dáin and his company were seated on the
left side. Dis and her sons, whom he greeted fondly and loudly, sat between them and Thorin.

The dinner progressed nicely and painlessly for Hemery, except for her shoulder which did not agree with her choice of dress, her seat, or her stiff, formal posture. She would have rather sat with her legs crossed, leaning back with her left arm on the armrest to alleviate the weight. Hanah, who sat directly to Hem's right, discreetly moved food from her own plate to Hem's, hoping to spare her the humiliation of being seen having someone cut her meat for her. No one took notice. Except Thorin, of course.

He put his right hand on the back of her chair, turning toward her slightly to speak closely. "What is the matter? Why does your sister serve you?"

She sat stiffly in her seat, enduring the ache which the static pose produced.

"Nothin'," she replied truthfully. "It's just my arm. I still can't use it as much as I would like to."

He frowned at that but said no more. He could do nothing about it, so what was there to say?

More times during the dinner than Hemery could count, a guest would stand and hold a toast for the occasion, or sometimes just for the longevity and prosperity king, demanding all raise their drinks and promptly drain them. The speakers included Fíli, Kíli, Dis, and Balin, all of their old companions, Bard and Sigrid, and many others. Most of them she recognised, but not all.

Even Dwalin proposed a toast, albeit a short one.

"To Erebor," he offered gruffly, "and those in her heart who endeavor to be worthy of her." His eyes were upon the newlyweds when he spoke.

There seemed to be a unanimous confusion among the guests as to his meaning, but seeing as it was nothing principally wrong with the sentiment, all raised their drinks in salute. "To Erebor," they echoed. Hanah, who had a mild apple must instead of wine, touched the rim of her cup to Dwalin's and Sethie's before drinking heartliy, the three of them seemingly sharing an agreement with this particular toast than with the others. Hemery stopped trying to match the dwarves tempo after her first cup—which actually was her second of the evening—settling for a sip each time.

After an hour or so, Thorin and Hemery rose from their seats as servants presented them with a golden brown loaf of bread so big that it would not even have fit in the old oven at Dwalin's cottage, decorated with swirling braids of dough and scattered dried fruit and seeds. By their plates appeared small silver cups, the size of egg cups, holding a burning liquid. Thorin drew his sword—not the same Hem had used to cleave orcs with, she observed with relief—and with her hands enfolded with his on the hilt, they cut the bread in two to the great approval of their audience. This was another symbol of abundance, sharing fruitfulness and the tool with which to reap it.

Then they picked up the burning cups, blew out the blue flames, exchanged cups, and downed the contents in one go. Though Hem was careful to not put her lips to the cup, the liquid seared her throat and settled in her belly like an ember straight from the fire. She suspected it was that special Khazad brandy Kíli praised so highly. She could not distinguish between the quality of this craftsmanship and intestinal torture by hot oil which, according to Kíli, also happened to be a Khazad specialty, exercised only on rare occasions, similar to the brandy. Again, cheers erupted around them as Hem sat back down with intention to eat as much of that bread as possible in order to soak up the poison she had just ingested.

Everyone else seemed to have the opposite idea. People started to rise, heading to the clear areas around the tables to dance. Those who remained seated were of the mind to keep drinking.
However, Hem was confident most could handle themselves, as opposed to her who would stick to solely eating for the rest of the evening. No more drinking, she vowed to herself—and to Hanah, just in case—and definitely no dancing in this dress.

As the night wore on, Hem felt more and more dazed by her drink and the food which she could not another bite of. The air was filled with music and laughter, louder and louder. Waves of heat came over her from the fires and the warm bodies moving in the hall. Her shoulder did not only ache but a faint prickling sensation also ran up and down her arm. She wanted to undress the layers of silk and gold. She wanted to lay down in peace and quiet.

Hanah had danced a few line dances with Ëli before taking the child to bed. She had not returned. Hem was not surprised; Hanah was not particularly entertained by grand feasts, not after midnight anyhow. Ëli had been absorbed in conversation with Balin and their elven guests for some time. Ëli was always social, always the diplomat. Hem admired Ëli for it, glad that at least one Durin found it valuable to cultivate relations with their neighbors. Hem would not have the patience to spend time with drunk strangers for the good of the kingdom, but Ëli actually seemed to enjoy it. Ëli seemed to enjoy himself even more, never keeping still, talking to different people every time Hem spotted him in the crowd.

Kíli had tried to coax Hem to join him in the fray of the dance, but she refused with the argument, "I'll dance with you the day you wear the same dress as I," silencing him only for short limits of time. Kíli had then went on to tempt Êalin to participate in the dance with the threat that some might think he opposed to the marriage if he did not. Êalin answered with one withering look that conveyed clearly how much he cared about that. Soon after, Êalin disappeared. Òís had also vanished in the festivities. Hem decided to not speculate whether the two incidents were related.

Thorin did not move from his chair all night but for short moments. However, he always had someone to his left, holding his attention. Although people had toasted and proclaimed their well wishes throughout the evening, people still came up to Hemery and Thorin to share a few words or indeed a speech of some sort, sometimes even asking favours. Hem was grateful that she was not required to do much but smile and nod; Thorin was their main target.

At the moment, he was roped into a discussion with a member of the merchant guild. Hem did not know his name, and she could not make out much of what they spoke of due to the clamour in the room. Hem felt great sympathy for Thorin then. This was what it was like for the king all the time, people pulling at his coat sleeve constantly, begging for attention. But Hem was not needed for this. She wanted to go to bed.

Sethie came tumbling down into the seat to Hem's right. Lips dark from wine and cheeks flushed from the dance, she smiled at Hem.

"You alright?" she asked. "You need to pee again?" Her smile widened.

At one point during the evening, after Hanah had left, Sethie had most graciously helped Hemery to a privy and held her skirts while Hemery relieved herself, to the accompaniment of their joined peels of laughter. Their slight intoxication helped them see the absurdity in the situation and find it most amusing.

"I'm really tired. Do you think I can leave soon?" Hem asked, leaning to her right so only Sethie would hear.

Sethie looked around. "Oh, yeah. It's getting late, now. Should be fine."

"You're sure?" The last thing Hem wanted was to make a mistake on her wedding day.
Sethie shrugged. "I've never attended a royal wedding before. But it's your day. The feast's in your honour. If there's one day when you can do what you want and go to bed when you want, it's today. Who cares what anyone else thinks? The ceremony's done. He can't change his mind." She broke into a giggle.

Hem had to laugh, as well. It was true—there was no going back now. It was done. The relief pulled the last of Hem's will to keep awake, and she allowed exhaustion wash over her.

Sethie ignored Thorin's company and stood to address him. "Sire," she said clearly and much more sober sounding than she was. "Lady Hemery is tired and wishes to retire." No request, simply informing him.

Thorin turned to Hemery. She tried to sit straight and keep her eyes open and alert in case he wished to speak to her before she left, but there was no doubt in her mind that she looked as worn as she felt.

"Of course," he said, taking her hand and frowning with concern. "Go. Rest." He squeezed her hand before letting go.

She stood then, with Sethie's help, and left with her guards. Sethie offered to come with Hem to help her out of her clothes before returning to the feast.

"So . . ." Hem spoke uncertainly to Sethie as they made their way to the third floor. "There's no expectation for us to . . . leave together?" she asked vaguely, referring to herself and Thorin.

Sethie chuckled. "No one questions dwarves' ambitions to drink themselves into a stupor. He'll join you later. No one is interested in what you do behind closed doors. Well, they are interested, naturally. People always talk. But you know what I mean. They'll assume that everything progresses properly." She dismissed Hem's worry with a wave of her hand. "For all they know, you had too much to drink and are about to acquaint yourself with the porcelain bowl under your bed."

Hem frowned. "I don't want them to think that either," she said, unhappy.

"Or perhaps you and the king have already consummated your union in carnal intimacy so often and thoroughly that you need a good night's rest free from that dwarrow's greedy paws," Sethie offered as another alternative.

Hem gasped, horrified at the mere thought that some would believe so.

"How about that?" Sethie asked. "I can go on if this is making you feel better."

"Gods, no," Hem hissed. "You need to hush, right now. I changed my mind. I don't want to know what people think."

Sethie smiled, satisfied. "There's a good lass."

The royal chambers looked very much the same as last time Hemery ventured through them. Sethie helped her unhook all the gold she wore, placing the pieces in its designated box. She folded the hair lace, unwound the midsection, and unlaced the collar so Hemery could easily just step out of the dress when she was alone. Hem had sweated through her shift, from nerves and from the hot dining hall, so she washed quickly at a basin in the washroom after she cleaned her teeth and then changed into a fresh shift before bed. She noticed a few of her belongings there. Her dressing gown hung beside Thorin's. Her comb and hair pins sat in one of the cupboards. One of the wardrobes contained all her clothes and shoes. Tomorrow, she decided, she would go see where they put all
her other things.

Hem carefully pushed open the heavy door to the bedchamber, then found herself just standing there in the opening, unable to enter. The flat, smooth coats of reindeer covered the stone floor. Beardskins on the bed. The mantel of the fireplace was tall enough to stand in, as all the others in Thorin's appartments, and its low-burning fire the only light source in the room. All other lanterns and candles were unlit.

Two armchairs sat on opposite sides of the fireplace, and a bench with extra blankets stood at the foot of the bed. A small desk with some writing paper and ink stood in a corner. Fine wool tapestries hung on the walls, depicting a high view of mountain ridges and valley formations in shades of blue and grey, as if one stood amongst the clouds at the top of a mountain at dawn.

Maybe she was making a mistake. Was she really meant to sleep in the king's bed? She was well aware they were now married, but it all seemed surreal, still. Perhaps there was another one of his rooms prepared for her as her own bedroom separate from his? She took a short turn to peek into the rooms closest to Thorin's main living area. All dark, just like before. There was no mistake.

Finally, Hemery entered the bedroom, adjusted the logs in the fireplace, and turned down the covers on the bed. As she debated on which side to lay down, she noticed one last thing that made her mind up for sure. She recognised her pillow, from her old bed, by its texture and scent. It was definitely hers, there on the left side of the bed.

The linen was soft and cool against her feet as she climbed in. The crackle of the fire was soothing in its irregular rhythm. Hem thought she would have trouble to sleep in a new place but drifted off after what seemed like only a few heartbeats.

She woke from movement in the bedchamber. The light in the room was much dimmer than when she fell asleep, but she could make out Thorin's shape in the shadows. Perhaps several hours had passed, but her mind was now muddled with sleep so she just lay still, her apprehension muted, and let sleep reclaim her.

After an immeasurable amount of time, she felt the covers stir. He seemed to have settled in, and she thought he was going to sleep when a graze as light as air brushed her skin. Her shift had twisted in her sleep, the neckline rising on the side she slept on while falling on the other, exposing half the rounded form of her left shoulder which suddenly felt chilly now her attention was drawn to it. She also detected the scent of brandy on the air, presumably from her bedfellow's breath.

Something precise—a fingertip, perhaps—traced a small shape on the slope of her shoulder down to below her collarbone. The touch was so gentle, a caress so fleeting and intimate, it left an ache in her heart when it stopped, fading from her senses like mist evaporating. An almost imaginary thing in the reality of its absence. Had it even been there, she wondered in the dark, in the silence, as sleep drowned her once more. The last thing she registered was a warmth enfolding her and something soft covering her cold shoulder.
The darkness crushed Hemery. She could neither breathe nor stir. Vaguely, she was aware that the unnatural pressure that fettered her was of her own making, imaginary. She could feel air on her face though she was suffocating. She could feel the soft down beneath her back though her limbs were paralysed, as if trapped under heavy rocks. She attempted to open her eyes, but they would not obey.

This is not real.

Slowly, her hands rose from her chest, fingers splayed to break free from this veil shielding her from the world of the waking, the living, like the hooves of an infant lamb breaking through the sheer film within which it is born.

Instantly, the mare that rode her vaporised. Hem opened her eyes, wide at first in the gloom, then squeezing them shut in frustration as the full realisation hit her that it had only been a dream.

Relishing in her free movements, she turned on her side, drawing up her knees, and drew full, quick breaths to steady herself, to ground herself.

She was fine. She was alive.

Suddenly, there was a weight on her waist. She flinched, opening her eyes. Warm coals glowed low in the fireplace still, reflecting in the polished wood of the furniture around the room. Then she remembered where she was.

Thorin's chambers. Their chambers. She recognised his scent which now mingled with hers.

It was Thorin who lay behind her, his hand on her waist, over the covers, his thumb that soothed her in its slow motion back and forth.

She breathed out in relief, willing her heart to slow.

"Hem?" he asked softly, voice gravelly and inarticulate from sleep.

"'Tis nothin'," she replied low. "Only a dream."

"You alright?"

"I'm well." She shifted, tucked one arm under her pillow, pushed one knee higher to her middle while the other straightened beneath her. "Apologies. Return to sleep."

Thorin allowed his hand to slip away from her as she moved, and she immediately missed it, but she did not want to disturb him further, and she was not about to ask him for it back. She would soon go back to sleep, she thought.

But she did not. Though fatigue made her body heavy, sleep evaded her mind. She tried to shift to a better position, and not for the first time did she curse her bad shoulder for taking so long to heal. What she would not give to be able to lay on her left side, finally. But she could not, so she did not. And the sweet respite of sleep would not come for her.

Carefully, she pulled back the covers and sat up. The air was not as chilly as she would have
thought, and the furs on the floor embraced her bare feet. She would not unsettle her husband while she left the room to seek diversion out of bed for a moment. She had noticed some books in Thorin's smaller study earlier, so she headed there now to escape the confines of her own mind.

Hem heated water in the tea kettle and set it to steep with ginger while she opened a tome written by an ancestor of Thorin's. A journal or travel log, written in Khuzdul unfortunately, but she could make out some of its meaning. It appeared to be equal parts diary and geographical description of the dwarf's travels, mapping out both flora and fauna of the north as well as noting events and people he encountered during his movements. In some places, Hem saw smaller scribbles in the margins which she deciphered as verses, sometimes rhymed things, sometimes merely contemplative, poetic reflections.

At the well below in the valley
green grows the constant ivy
up chimneys and downhill
And in her hair, the leaves she bear
but never deeper still
At the well below in the deep
no ivy grows to keep
The faces of stone too steep

Hem had just managed to immerse herself in the thoughts of this stranger, forgetting her surroundings and the reason for her insomnia when the door to the bed chamber opened.

"I'm sorry," she hurried to say as she caught sight of Thorin standing in the doorway in his plain linen trousers which he had probably slept in. His robe hung untied from his shoulders. "Did I wake you?"

As he silently came closer, she took in his bare chest and feet with a suddenly dry mouth, though she had seen it all before.

"What is this?" he asked, still muddled with sleep. Nevertheless, he looked curious as he sat down next to her by the fire she had stoked some life into. He sunk down into the chair, low like always, with feet set apart and one hand supporting his chin, completely unbothered by his state of undress. She, at least, had pulled a knitted shirt over her nightdress, so she was at least modestly covered, except for the one foot which was not tucked beneath her but hovered over the rug, toes resting lightly on it.

"I couldn't sleep," she explained. "Hope you don't mind?" She tilted the book for him to see. When he did not reply, she went on. "Don't inconvenience yourself on my behalf. I'll come back to bed soon."

"Are you certain all is well?" he asked once more.

"Aye, I'm certain." She gave him a small smile. "You should rest, though. The king should not be forced to sleeplessness by someone else's whims."

"On the morrow of my wedding, I think I'll be excused some amount of indolence."
The implication of such leniency being that the king would have spent the night awake anyway, most likely in his new marital bed. Hem felt her cheeks heat.

"Take care, it may be the only day of your reign that laziness will be tolerated," she advised. "Shouldn't squander it on actually sleeping the day away."

His face gave no indication that he found her amusing but for a short shake of his head and his simply delivered, "I do not squander," as he stood and took the liberty of a sip of her tea. She pursed her lips to keep from smiling properly and thus encouraging him.

Before he returned to the bed chamber, however, he grazed her shoulder with his fingers. She looked up to meet his eyes. He raised his hand to her face then, his thumb tracing her eyebrow. She closed her eyes instinctively, letting him touch her freely. His fingers gently followed the dip of her eyes, smoothing the lines of her eyelids and the furrows of her brow.

"May your dreams be calm and light when you go back to sleep," he rumbled, like a spell read over her while he wrote runes in her skin.

When his hands left her and she opened her eyes, he was already turned away and on his way to the door. He said no more before he shut himself in and neither did Hemery. An hour later—or perhaps more, Hem could not tell—she went back to their bed.

Hemery did not remember her sleep when she woke in the morning. Thorin was already out of bed and gone by the time she roused, his side of the bed as cold as if he had never been there; his words about an idle day had clearly only been in jest. After all, he had a duty to his guests that had come from far and wide to yesterday’s ceremony. They would probably take the opportunity to conduct business during their stay, as well. No rest for the king.

Vaguely, Hem remembered a soft touch to her shoulder the night before. Looking herself over in the mirror after washing, she pulled her robe back to see the dark scar, left from the orc blade that killed Asta, next to the round of her left shoulder. Was that what drew Thorin’s gaze last night? She did not know.

The first thing she saw when she got up was her wedding dress hanging over a chair. She decided to take it down to the laundry after breakfast. She was headed out for the breakfast room, where she usually ate with Hanah and Híli, when she noticed food served in the small study. Bread, cheese, ham, and tea. She looked around dumbly. Surely Thorin had already eaten; this meal must be prepared for her.

Finishing the food, she felt bad leaving the tray with dirty dishes where it was and chose to bring it with her as she left. Her shoulder twinged slightly during the short walk. As she neared the part of Thorin’s chambers that contained his study, where she normally entered, she noticed his door was closed. Instead, in the tall room with the large tapestries and the skylight, she encountered Vannur and Bror who waited for her and ushered her out through another door.

Before walking out into the corridor, however, Vannur looked pointedly at the tray in Hem’s hands and nodded to a small table next to the door. Hem got the hint and left the tray of dishes there. She knew of course that servants handled all their food and dishes, but this way at least, they did not need to search through all of the royal chambers on the hunt for dirty silverware. Vannur also cast a curious glance at the bag over her good shoulder. Hem did not say anything about it; she did not want Vannur to protest to her carrying things in her condition. She just led the way down to the laundry rooms in silence.
If today had been any other day, perhaps nothing might have been out of the ordinary about the simple task of laundry. Today was apparently not that, however, as Hem realised when she saw Sethie down there who, when she saw Hem, began hollering over the clamour of mangles, servants, and washing boards.

"What in Mahal's bloody name are you doing here?"

Hem stopped short, as did all other people present. "My dress," she began. "It's silk. I don't want to ruin it by lettin' it sit with my sweat."

Sethie closed the distance between them in long, determined strides. "Letting it sit? Gods' blood, who ever heard—?" She could hardly speak for astonishment. Suddenly, she reached out for Hem's bag, not waiting for her to hand it over. "Give it here. I'll see to it."

"No," Hem countered automatically, holding on to the straps of the bag. "You have far too much work already. You're not my maid."

"I know that," Sethie argued heatedly. "You have your own maids. I'll bring them round for you to meet so you can acquaint yourself with their faces and leave things like this alone." She kept tugging on the bag.

"Seth," Hem spoke between her teeth. "I can do my own laundry. Let go."

At Hem's demand, Sethie caught herself and glanced around, finally letting go of the bag. The dozen servants present were still frozen in place, silently watching the exchange between Hemery and Sethie. Vannur just stood back, regarding them both with concern bordering on amusement, not the least bit inclined to intervene on Hem's behalf.

"Very well," Sethie said stiffly. "It's not like we have the most skilled people handling these things, capable of completing the task in merely a fraction of the time it takes you. No, by all means, M'Lad," she said, waving a hand toward the closest washtub, "launder. Not like you have more important things to do."

Hem could only manage a frustrated, confused grimace at her. "What's the matter with you?" she asked irritably when she could not fathom why Sethie was so upset.

"Do you not have more pressing issues to attend to? Perhaps a midday meal with the king and his guest, scheduled for—" Sethie looked around, palms up, as if the answer would magically present itself to her, "I don't know, say a quarter of an hour from now?" she finished with a meaningful glare.

Hem stilled. "Now?" She looked from Sethie to Vannur and Bror, questioningly.

"Aye," Sethie said impatiently. "Right now. So move your little queenly behind down to the first floor, why don't you?"

Hem was about to go when she paused, turning back to glare at Sethie. "I'm pretty sure you're not supposed to talk to me that way any—"

"Go," Sethie ordered, cutting her off.

"Fine," Hem threw back, feet stomping and skirt whirling as she left.

"Did you know about this?" Hem asked Vannur when they were back in the corridor.
"I'm just your guard, M'Lady," Vannur replied with a patient smile. "But if you want assistance with official agendas, I guess I might aid you, if you wish. For the time being."

"I have an agenda?"

"Of course. You're the queen—"

Hem felt her stomach flip at the word.

"—you have duties as well as privileges. Some more important than others. You'll get used to it."

Hem cut her eyes at Vannur, disbelieving.

"Do not fret," Vannur went on. "Not much is planned today. The exception being these formal meals with the guests for the duration of their stay, which you are expected to attend with King Thorin."

Hem sighed. "I'll have to change my clothes, then."

The grey linen dress she wore was nice but old and not meant for much more than work and household chores, like the laundry she had planned. Back in the royal chambers, she hurried to change into a simple, dark blue dress with a matching tunic slipped over it. As soon as she stepped out, however, Vannur showed her back in.

"That won't do," she said, and pushed Hem into a chair, pulling out the pins from the knot in her hair. Nimble fingers untangled the tresses and quickly made a braid that hung over Hem's shoulder and on the end clasped the gem Thorin had given her.

"Where did you find that?" Hem asked.

"On the dresser," Vannur said. "I'm sure the king will not mind."

No, Hem agreed; he probably would not. Actually, now that she thought about it, she was not sure if he had given it to her as a loan or as a gift. She sighed once more. She just never could tell with that old dwarf.

She was directed to one of the smaller dining halls where Thorin, Dis, Fíli, Kíli, Balin, Daín, Sigrid, Bain, and their closest men were already assembled. When she entered the room, all who were present stood. Hem halted only a heartbeat before continuing to the empty seat on Thorin's right. She had not expected such a drastic change in people's attitudes toward her, but she was not about to try and stop that right now. She had to accept that things were changing.

As soon as she sat, all else followed suit.

"Forgive me for being late," she whispered to Thorin while the others settled and talked hushedly among themselves.

"All is well, I trust?" he asked, glancing at her below dark eyebrows.

"Aye, though it seems I need to reassess my ability to manage my time."

"I see," he said, nodding. And it actually seemed like he knew her reasons exactly. "Or you could have someone manage it for you," he offered.

Hem laughed lightly. She might not have full control of her time, but she could manage her own life, thank you very much.
Lunch progressed slowly with the dwarves being equally fond of debating as they were of eating, especially in the royal halls where food just kept coming as soon as plates were cleared. It must have been two hours they had sat there, the topic moving around the massive legal procedures regarding the black powder theft, and everyone's hands still stripped chicken legs, tore ever smaller pieces of bread, and drank their ale slowly as they spoke. Thorin insisted that he must be allowed the drink if he was forced to endure Bain's presence, though this was whispered to Hem in confidence when she asked whether they should not continue the discussion in one of the council rooms.

"I hate to admit it, but other soldiers have shown negative reactions to Beren's imprisonment," Fíli said as they focused on the punishment for the offenders currently occupying their cells. Since the matter regarded all their kingdoms, each had their say. "Not necessarily because they sympathise with him but because the situation is so inflamed. It's... unpleasant to be reminded of a kinsman's betrayal and failure."

"We ought to be reminded," Thorin said. "Every day, we should know how close we were to catastrophe and never forget that it may happen in the future."

Dreary but true.

"But we must also keep in mind how easily mistrust festers in people," Sigrid added. "Perhaps it would be unwise to let fear pollute the camaraderie, searching for treason were there is none. Beren's case was an isolated incident. And though the black powder moved through my city as well and could easily have been stolen along the way, I for one, will not treat it as anything but the tragic actions of one weak soul, and I will not encourage collective punishments as a preemptive measure. I would not give him that power."

Naive perhaps but also true.

When this impasse caused a short pause, Thorin looked to Balin, not speaking but clearly wanting his opinion.

"Difficult as this might be politically," Balin began carefully, "there are also the practical matters to be considered. The prisoners are guilty of crimes committed to the city of Esgaroth, but Bain does not have the facilities to contain that many prisoners."

"Except for Beren, surely," Kíli asked for clarification, "since his greatest offense is treason to the crown of Erebor."

"Which he committed by colluding with individuals to steal, and conspiring to do worse, in Esgaroth," Balin argued.

"The illegal actions were performed in my city," Bain said, agreeing with Balin, "on my watch, and the damage was made to my people, therefore all the prisoners should be my responsibility."

"Material damage is not the only harm he has done." Thorin's voice held an edge which Hem was not sure whether it was directed at Beren or Bain, probably both. She noticed Thorin's hands close into fists on his armrests, and she reached out to grasp his wrist—a reminder that she understood his ire and to keep calm. His eyes flickered to her, as if catching himself, before his steel gaze returned to Bain across the room. When he continued, his voice remained icy, but his temper did not escalate. "Focus your retribution upon your butcher—should you ever find him—and issue whatever justice you see fit on his brutes, but leave Beren's fate to me."

The quiet tension in the room was chilly for a moment after Thorin had spoken, but he, himself,
seemed mostly just irritated that the discussion was dying before reaching a conclusion.

Suddenly, a loud burp echoed from their left. Looking up, Hem saw Daín wiping his mouth on a napkin big as a pillowcase and refilling his tankard from a small barrel which he had clearly commandeered from the servants and placed on the table next to him for his personal use.

"Damn Beren," Daín said heatedly. "Damn him for takin’ his freedom for granted and abusin’ it. We should all rue the day when warmasters take the law into their own hands, threatenin’ and makin’ violence upon other wretches even more pathetic than themselves, connivin’ and schemin’ for their own personal gain. We’ll all be damned."

Hemery sat pondering his words. Had that day not already passed? Did Daín mean they were all damned already? She did not like the pessimistic path the conversation had taken. But Daín was clearly finished with his speech of doom, content with drinking his ale in silence as he had the last hour. Thank Mahal for small favours.

With a frown, Thorin glanced at Hemery. "What do you say?" he asked her.

Surprised, she looked at him. She had only been gone from the council for about two months, but she had easily distanced herself from those duties since Blackwater, and she was not prepared to be consulted in the company of kings and lords of other lands. Her previous tasks had been rather mundane in comparison. However, she was well acquainted with the issue, and she would be lying if she said that she did not have an opinion. She had plenty. She gathered her wits for a moment before she spoke.

"Beren has confessed to all charges. There is no point to keep him in a detention cell. Beren's testimony will only be useful when—" Hem caught herself before she misspoke, "—if the butcher is ever found and taken to trial. He might as well be allowed to start servin' his sentence now. Make him atone for his actions with work, to benefit others for a change."

Thorin’s mouth tightened in determination as he gave her a short nod. He understood her meaning. To send him to the Iron Hills as a prison worker, if Thorin so wished, like they had spoken of before.

It could even be a mercy for Beren to escape his own mind, for him to do something productive with his days, to wear out his body during the day and be given deep, dreamless sleep at night. It had helped her when her father had passed, leaving her and Hanah to do nothing but work so as not to worry about the future. Same when Hem and her sister had moved to Dale. Work and sleep got them through some hard times. But she chose not to share that aspect with Thorin; it might have made him less inclined to send him away.

"Send them all to the work camp," Daín announced. "They'll regret ever darin' to cross either one of you." He pointed around the room at all present. "I'll have them chippin’ iron ferrite with their nails. And when their nails fall out, they’ll have to use their toes. And when their toes give out, they’ll use their teeth. And when—"

"Don't be absurd," Balin interrupted Daín's tangent with a pshhh and a snort. "Only dwarves can withstand your prison. Wouldn't be fair to traitors and cowards of mankind. A man would be worn down to nought within a decade. No, we'll keep the others here."

"Looks like we'll be sharing the prisoners," Kíli concluded with a wink to Bain. "Mahal knows there's enough to go around."
When Hemery returned to the laundry room after the late lunch, Sethie and the dress were gone. Hem spent a few hours with Hanah in her workshop before supper, mostly just sitting, talking a bit, and performing easier work that would not tire her shoulder. She had never before contemplated how strenuous leather work was, but now she noticed the force Hanah used for folding and stitching the tough material, her fingertips whitening from the pressure. Hem, on the other hand, could hardly weave a bracelet without her collarbone aching after a few moments.

At dinner, Thorin and his guests gathered once more, but this time, the topics of conversation were unrelated to politics and mostly consisted of Daín and Sigrid having it out over the poor postal service between the Iron Hills and Erebor. Hem suspected Sigrid's temper had something to do with her sister having lived there for at least ten years due to a marriage that Sigrid strongly disapproved of. Hem also suspected that Daín deliberately riled up Sigrid because he kept making thinly veiled innuendos and flirtatious comments to distract her from the issue at hand. Hem wished she could have had dinner in solitude with Hanah and Híli like usual while Fíli and Kíli were profoundly amused by the spectacle in the king's dining hall.

After dinner, which ran longer than the midday meal, Hem retired to the royal chambers while Thorin stayed behind, his duties still unfinished. She read a while in the small study—the only thing she could do without pain—until her eyelids drooped. When she finally went to bed and fell asleep, Thorin had still not come in.

Hemery ran through a dark forest, jaws of beasts snapping at her heels. Tree branches hit her face so she could not see. Suddenly, the forest floor gave out, dropping her in an endless fall through darkness.

Jerking, Hem awoke on the soft feather bed, but her dream left her with a desolate feeling, lonely and empty. The room was too quiet, only disturbed by her own erratic breathing.

Beside her, she could make out Thorin's profile against the low light of the embers in the fireplace. On his back, his stern brow relaxed, thin lips open slightly, he looked peaceful. But Hem had to make sure.

Shifting closer, she carefully placed her hand over his heart. The steady rhythm reverberated in her, traveling the length of her arm and into her chest which felt cold and hollow in comparison. She envied him his warmth and strength testified by the blood flowing through his heart.

Gently, Hem traced the skin at the opening of his shirt from his chest to his shoulder, feeling the hair that kept him warm and the muscle that kept him strong. The comfort of his presence was immense. She leaned in, lowered her face to the hair flowing over his pillow, and breathed in his scent. As long as it was in her lungs, she was certain. And a soon as she let it go, she was not. Of what, she did not know. Everything, she supposed.

Heat covered her hand as Thorin's palm trapped hers against his chest. Surprised, she attempted to draw back, but he would not let her, holding her hand firmly in place.

"Hem?" he asked through sleep but equally aware as the previous night.

"I had a dream," was all she managed.

He seemed to understand and surprised her further by lifting her hand from his chest and placing it on his cheek.

"I'm fine," he said, as if knowing her fears. "You are safe. All is well."
Her eyes burned suddenly. Her fingers were cold between his cheek and his hand. He could not promise her that they would always be safe, but he wanted to—and that was why she loved him. In the wake of her nightmare, she felt like she had that night in Blackwater, like any moment could be their last.

She let go of his cheek, bringing his hand up to kiss his knuckles. She pressed her lips to his rough skin for a long moment, not wanting to let up, and when she did, she only kissed it again. But when she turned his hand over and kissed his palm, Thorin grasped her face, pulling her down to him.

Their lips met hesitantly at first, then his hands grew demanding, pressing her closer. Stale breath from hours of sleep was exchanged, but Hem did not care because he pushed her to lie on her back, covered her with his body, and claimed her mouth once more. Heat flared in her as she felt his wide back beneath her hands, his insistent lips on hers, and hard flesh between her thighs.

Hem brought her hands up to keep his long hair from tickling her face. Thorin's teeth and tongue teased her, urging her to open up to him. When she allowed it, his tongue gently met hers in slow, searing kisses. Then he shifted his hips, sending tingles to her head and toes at the same time, giving rise to a sweet burn in her stomach, making her moan into his mouth.

With her eyes closed and his weight pressing on her, an errant thought occurred to her—was this the darkness that was coming to crush and consume her?

Eyes flying open, she caught a flash at her hand where she held his hair, something moving within the gem of her ring. It glittered and erupted, a dark fluid running down her knuckles, down her wrist, rivulets itching at her skin as much as Thorin's hair.

Blood, she realised with a gasp that severed her connection to Thorin.

He stilled under her hands, then pulled back. He reached to catch her chin and her eyes which were stuck on her hand, forcing her to look at him.

"Where are you?" he asked, his thumb stroking her chin and lower lip.

Hem tightly squeezed her eyes closed, opening them to focus on her hand again. It was clean. Her hand was buried in Thorin's black hair, though. She must have been mistaken, confusing the dark tresses for blood. Perhaps she had been further immersed in sleep than she thought.

She released Thorin, pushing the heels of her hands into her eyes, groaning. "Forgive me. The mare will not let go," she said, turning on her side, away from Thorin.

Tender hands ran over her hair, down her back, soothing in their steadfastness. Hem sighed, relaxing under Thorin's touch.

"You will not remember this in the morning, will you?" he asked from behind her.

"What?" Hem asked, confused. She pushed her hair out of her face, settled a palm on her brow, and willed herself not to cry.

"We have been here before, have we not? You waking in the dead of night, overcome with fear, out of your mind with anxiety." He paused, as if to gather courage or perhaps allowing her to. "You put your hands on me, making certain I am not a figment of your imagination. Then . . . the next day, it will have faded into memory as a ghost of a dream, and you will have no recollection of this."

"No," Hem protested without thought, turning her head back toward him. "I mean, that's not
why—" She stopped herself, wanting to assure him she wanted his embrace, that it was not merely an urge to comfort herself after the nightmare. But how could she trust her senses? Perhaps he was right.

"You never initiate contact between us in your waking hours. Never." There was no judgement in his voice, only curiosity. And perhaps a touch of regret. "How should I know whether you are of sound mind when you kiss me?"

Heat spread over Hem's face, but her tears dried. "Because I kiss you," came her answer.

He sighed, close enough that his breath reached her cheek. "I am your king, after all," he spoke low and resigned.

She felt annoyance rise at that, and she turned away again, settling down with her back to him as she replied. "If you think I would succumb to your limited charms because of your title, Sire," she began caustically, "then you are more arrogant than I thought. And what of Blackwater? I kissed you first, and then you refused to see me for a week. What am I to think?"

The puff of air on her face this time seemed like a chuckle. "I have trouble recollecting Blackwater myself, but I am quite certain I was clinging to you like I was drowning, not the other way around."

"So—" Hem's own curiosity got the better of her. "I take it you did not mind?" she asked, understating her implication.

A heavy arm came around her shoulder then, grasped her chin lightly, and lifted it so she faced him. He was right there, wide shoulders hovering above her, his face inches from hers.

"Do I appear to mind, dear wife?" he said, voice raspy. He did not seem to await a response, though she would have had time to produce one before he slowly descended upon her, his lips finding hers again.

Hemery wanted it—more than sleep, more than a working arm as his body pressed unknowingly on her bad shoulder, and she did not care. But she could not completely let go, the image of blood on her hands still too vivid in her mind. Thorin probably felt it, keeping the pace slow and languorous until finally pulling away. Touching his temple to hers, he sighed.

"Apologies," she whispered, unhelpful. "I keep seein'—" She could not even talk about the absurd and terrifying imagery of her nightmares, only spread her fingers in a vague gesture.

"The mare does not control you. You control her." Thorin's fingers caressed Hem's face, tracing her eyebrow and her closed eyelid. "Come back to me," he spoke softly at her neck. "Do not let her take you away from me."
Unexpected Responsibilities

Sethie presented Hemery with Bryndis and Jorunn who had been appointed by Dis to be Hemery's maids, taking care of everything from laundry, serving meals, cleaning, sewing, drawing baths, and dressing, to shopping and delivering correspondence. Basically everything that Hemery up until a year ago had always done herself.

Bryndis was a red haired dwarven woman with wide strong hands, freckles lighting up her face. Jorunn was a blonde woman of mankind, much to Hemery's surprise, with the same tempered demeanor as Bryndis which she had probably acquired after several years of service in dwarven halls. But they had mild, good natured faces that Hem was sure she would learn to trust and esteem.

Both Bryndis and Jorunn had much to do during the following days—but moved with the air of being offended that there was not more work to be done—as Hemery settled once more into something resembling a routine, dividing her time between the council room and the halls of schooling. During her absence, she had neglected her project with Dis and the schoolmasters, and she struggled to catch up and still plan ahead. It was challenging but rewarding and helped dispel the bloody ghosts of the past and the foul remnants of her nightmares.

Only one worry was allowed in the forefront of her mind, the recovery of Lida. Hem could not rid herself of the vision of her in her sickbed, less than whole and bound in white. Therefore, when the last of the wedding guests had departed and the need for Hem's presence at court was no longer pressing, she prepared herself and her guards for a day trip to Esgaroth.

Thankfully, Hemery's arm was relieved of the sling before leaving Erebor. She had very little strength in it still, and sometimes it would tingle as if falling asleep, but it was better than the constant, dull ache. She kept it passively at her side as she moved through Esgaroth's narrow streets, letting her right hand keep track of her skirts and her cloak.

The summer months did wonders for the town's trade but did no favours for its atmosphere, the heat only increasing the smell of seaweed, smoked fish, and waste. Even in the house of healing, the air was stuffy and humid. Perhaps she should have supported Bain's petition for building a new house of healing when she had the chance, Hem thought bitterly as she regarded poor Lida through the doorway. She had been moved from the isolation of the small room to the larger area of recovery where beds stood in rows of ten or more along the walls, only white linen drapes acting as illusions of privacy.

The lass was sitting up in bed, propped with pillows behind her back. Her skin was bare above her white linen shirt collar, her hair pulled back to not distress her red and purple flesh which seemed almost to have melted. The scar was glossy, as if polished to a high sheen, but Hem suspected it was a healing salve of some kind. Lida's hand was still bandaged around the missing finger.

Finally, Hemery gathered courage and stepped into the room. Lida's focus turned toward her, eyebrows hitching in surprise. But it was nothing compared to Hem's shock at seeing her face up close.

The scar on her right side was a mere blush compared to the damage the blackpowder flame had done to her right eye. The hazel of her iris had spread like ink on wet paper, diluted to a pale yellow, spilling into the pupil from right and left, leaving only a thin strip of black in the middle. It looked like a reptile's eye as depicted in the pictures of earth worms and fire drakes. A dragon's eye.
Lida must have noticed Hem's hesitance. "Monstrous, isn't it?"

"No," Hem said quickly, coming to sit beside the bed. "Certainly not. Just..." What was it, indeed? Hem had seen the bandages before. What had she expected? "I knew you'd be changed, just not so... I had hoped it was only superficial."

"At least my head is intact, so I'm perfectly aware of my unsightliness," Lida said with a smirk.

Hem managed to smile back. "I was not as fortunate, I'm afraid. I hit my head pretty bad, and I've seen some strange things since, your face bein' the least strange of them all."

Lida huffed out an amused breath and looked down. "You don't have to coddle me, m'lady. I know what I am."

A lump formed in Hem's throat.

"I thought you'd be finished with wandering the slums of Lake Town, too busy being queen and all," Lida went on.

"I wanted to come sooner," Hem said but unable to find a sufficient reason for her two week absence. She had been busy with the wedding, sure, but it had been sunshine and daisies compared to Lida's painful, traumatic fortnight. Hem could swear on her earnest prayers for Lida's well-being, but they would only be words.

"It doesn't matter," Lida said, shaking her head.

"It does." It was Hem's turn to look down.

"Why have you come now?"

Hem was not sure if it was curiosity or accusation lacing Lida's words. Either way, she needed a moment and a deep breath before she answered.

"I want to express my sincerest and most ardent apology," Hem said, finally. Her hands twisted together in her lap. "I take full responsibility of what happened to you, and I assure you, you will be compensated for your sufferin'. I know that nothin' can undo what has been done, but your sacrifice will not be ignored."

"I don't want your charity or your pity," Lida said sharply, her hoarse voice astonishing Hem with its strength, making her meet Lida's eyes. "I'm not a cripple. I will get up from this bed on my own."

"Alright," Hem conceded. "Forgive me, I promise not to pity you."

The glare Lida shot her was devastating with the serpent eye as well as the good eye focused on Hem.

"You only want my forgiveness because you think you have wronged me somehow, but if you do not pity me, there must be nothing wrong with me. I will not forgive you, for there is nothing to forgive. I may only be a pathetic thief to you, m'lady, but don't insult me by thinking so little of my own actions and choices."

Hem felt more shame at that. She knew she could not barter away her guilty conscience, and now she had offended Lida by trying. The past cannot be undone; only amends can be made.
They sat in silence for a moment.

"I still owe you wages," Hem said sheepishly.

Lida seemed to think it over, unable to refuse, most likely because she could not deny that she needed money.

"You may pay me what I'm owed, but not a copper more," she agreed reluctantly.

But what then? Lida still had a long way to go before she recovered, and she would never regain full use of her right hand. How would she support herself, and how would she pay the healers for such extensive care? Surely, she did not wish to go back to the street, picking pockets and ducking the law as well as other thieves. Perhaps with the burns on her face, she could gain sympathy as a beggar, sitting at the market place or outside the temples, displaying her wounds like a merchant displayed goods, playing on people's emotions as a street musician played the violin on the corner. But it would kill what spirit her young years had yet to drain from her.

Lida was stubborn, but not unreasonable. And she was clever.

Hem smiled to herself. "How would you like to earn a permanent wage?" she asked.

A light sparked in Lida's good eye, but it went out just as quickly. "I'm no good to you anymore. I can't move or see as well as I used to."

"I'm not talkin' about sneakin' down dark alleys and spyin' on shady characters," Hem explained. "I mean a respectable position, a secure place with a salary you can live on and more."

"Doing what?"

Hem sat forward. "First, you'll heal properly in a place where you can rest and breathe air that's not more rancid and boilin' than outside. Then, you'll finish your education—"

"I'm not an illiterate simpleton," Lida argued. "I know how to read."

"I know," Hem said, feeling less and less intimidated by the dragon eye Lida cut at her. "But I also know the level of trainin' you've received here in your childhood cannot possibly compare to the schoolin' that Erebor can provide for you."

"I don't need schooling," Lida protested pig-headedy.

"Really? What will you do for money when you get out of here? What skills do you have that does not involve all ten fingers dipped in every dirty stew in Lake Town? Oh—apologies, better make that eight and a half." That was harsh, but Hem knew she could take it.

Lips pressed together, Lida looked down in silence.

Hem went on softly. "Do you trust me?"

Lida looked up, seemingly very vulnerable and young. The dragon eye watered, and she dabbed the corner with her sleeve carefully. Hem could not tell whether it was because of overwhelming emotion or because Lida was still healing.

"Aye, m'lady," Lida said, voice cracked.

Perhaps Lida had no one else to turn to, or perhaps she really did trust Hemery. Either way, Hem was glad Lida would not refuse her help, even if it was disguised as business. She did not
particularly care if Lida would work for her after everything was settled; but Lida had always wanted to live in Erebor, and Hem would help her make a life for herself there.

"You'll finish your education," Hem maintained. "Then we'll talk."

Lida agreed to travel with Hemery to Erebor in a couple of days, enough time for Hem to prepare accommodations for her in the mountain. And Hem enjoyed a brief breath of relief at one issue of conscience handled as she left Lida at the house of healing before she was accosted with a new one.

Through the clamour of the streets where Hem moved—with Vannur, Bror, and a handful of guards who where unfamiliar to Hem but Vannur had appropriated before they left Erebor—she distinguished a repetitive sound, a shrill voice calling out. A long moment passed before she realised what it said.

"Your Highness," the voice shouted with annoyed impatience, and a woman came into Hem's field of vision ahead of her, seemingly having hurried to catch them.

To her defense, Hem did not think she could be faulted for not immediately hearkening to the title as she had only been married for a few days. She stopped, and her guards copied her.

The woman, a blonde, tall creature with a baby girl in her arms, regarded Hem with her chin high and a hand on her child's head, as if wanting to shield her from them.

Oh. Hem finally recollected her name.

"So," Leena bit out through tense lips, "you dare show your face here at last."

Hem felt a pang of guilt at that. Though Leena and Aksel had been in a bad situation even before Hem knocked on their door, she wished she could have helped more. And while the Butcher was only suspected dead—at worst, still at large—they were not safe. Did Leena even know that he was the one to put their destruction in motion?

"We're starving, and my husband rots in gaol, while you're playing house up in the big castle," Leena continued, tone poisonous.

Hem glanced up and down the street, a few people had stopped some yards away, observing the spectacle in the street, but not venturing closer. She felt her face heat with embarrassment at being scolded in public. Especially because it was deserved.

"You said you'd help us," Leena's voice broke.

"And I have," Hem tried. "I helped as much as I could."

"And yet, Aksel's still encarcerated, and I'm here, alone."

Hem stepped forward, holding an arm out to stop Bror from following as she closed the distance between her and Leena. Then she spoke, keeping her voice down so their spectators would not overhear.

"He received the shortest possible sentence under the circumstances, and despite his cooperation, he still committed a major crime. Don't say I did nothin' for you—you're lucky you're not in there with him."

"Aye, I should be grateful my daughter is not a homeless orphan," Leena replied scathingly.
"I am sorry I could not do more for you."

"You're a queen," Leena choked out, on the verge of angry tears. "You can make them let him go, can't you?" she whispered.

Bain held Aksel prisoner. Even with Bain's supposed indebtedness to Hemery, there was too much at stake for her to start negotiating his release. It would cause the legitimacy of the whole trial to be questioned and Bain's authority to be undermined. There where very few things Thorin and Bain agreed on, but this was one of them. As much as she empathised with Leena, Hem could not forgive Aksel's weakness, and she hated how his family had to suffer for it.

"I cannot," Hem said regretfully.

Leena squeezed her eyes shut for a moment in silent frustration, anger, and despair, clutching tighter to her child. When she opened her eyes once more, she seemed to have gathered enough strength to keep her manner calm and her visage dignified, even though Hem could see the tense lines around her mouth.

"Do you have a profession?" Hem asked.

Leena nodded. "Some needle work. But we are still in debt, so... And with everything else the way it is—" She trailed off, glancing at the girl in her arms. "It's difficult."

Hemery was tempted to offer the woman money but figured she would then have a dozen more women at her door in the morning, claiming to be begging on the streets after Thorin and Bain arrested their husbands. She had promised Leena nothing other than that she would try to apprehend the person who put them in danger, and she failed. Hem had not caused Leena's misfortune, but she felt the guilt all the same.

"I'm sorry," Hem said again, uselessly.

Leena just averted her eyes at that, deciding she was finished speaking to Hem, and brushed past her to disappear down the street, most likely back to the hovel in the Ashes. Hem's gut clenched at the thought.

The whole way back to Erebor, Hem turned the conversation over in her mind. When she finally reached the royal chambers, she called for Bryndis.

"In the mornin'," Hem said, "I want you to go to the Ashes in Esgaroth. There's a seamstress there, Leena, who I want you to see. If her work is good enough, I want you to commission her with somethin'. Anythin'."

"Aye, m'lady," Bryndis replied, half question, half statement, clearly bewildered by this strange request.

"I'll leave it up to you to decide what she should make, if indeed anythin' at all. Whatever she's good at, I suppose. And the price should be higher than what she currently charges. I'll excuse you from your regular duties for the entire day."

"Aye, m'lady." Bryndis curtsied.

Hem cringed. "Don't do that, please."

"M'lady?" Bryndis asked, ever increasingly confused.
"You may call me 'lady' because that is technically my title, and it would seem strange to others if you did not adhere to formality around me, but do not curtsy. Never curtsy. You already clean my chamber pot, for Mahal's sake, though I insist I'll do it myself. I shall not have you bow to me, as well."

Hem had enough guilt slapped in her face for one day; she did not need her servants acting like Hem was better than them, because she certainly was not.

"As you wish, m'lady."

Hem noticed Bryndis abort an automatic curtsy after speaking. "Ridiculous customs," Hem muttered to herself as the maid left.

As soon as Dwalin found out Hemery had been relieved of her sling, he demanded she take up training again. Despite her protests that she still was not recovered, he argued that how could she fully recover if she did not train? Hem had no defense against his warrior logic.

Therefore, the day after her visit to Esgaroth consisted entirely of short, explosive exercises with a sword which was heavy enough to make her contemplate feigning injury and wearing the sling a few more weeks, even though the sword was only made of wood.

After far too many hours of training, Dwalin ordered her to, during the following week, climb up and down the steep west slope of the mountain for endurance. In turn, Hem ordered him to the end of the earth to, in no uncertain terms, enjoy fire and brimstone for the rest of his drastically shortened life. Then she stalked off to shut herself in and to soak away her aches in the giant royal bathtub.

Jorunn had poured her a bath so hot that sweat broke out on Hem's face when she sunk down into the water. The heat made her tired, but it was not an exhausted fatigue like that of her muscles. The eucalyptus and bergamot in the water made it milky with an oil sheen on the surface. Hem did not know how long she lingered, lazily picking at her worn fingernails and almost dozing off, when she heard a door open and Thorin's voice calling out.

"Hem?"

She almost jumped up to cover herself in a robe or a towel but quickly realised there was no time; he must have been just in the next room. Instead, she sunk back down lower than normal in the water, watching it spill over the sides of the already full tub. It was only matter of time before he came in there, so she replied.

"In here," she called back, keeping her chin barely over the surface, turning her body to one side, and resting her elbows on the edge to cover her front as much as possible. She hoped the water was cloudy enough to hide most of her body. Thankfully, she had her back to the door, so that when Thorin came in, she did not need to face him fully with her flaming cheeks.

"I thought you wouldn't be in until late," Hem said when he just stood there silently in the doorway.

"Aye," he replied then. "I, uh. . . I won't stay long."

There was another pause, too long to be deliberate. She glanced back at him to see him properly. His face was blank, unbothered that he had interrupted her bath, but he made no move to enter or leave.
"Thorin?" she said, carefully urging him to speak and break the tension.

He roused himself quickly out of some revery. "You are bringing the thief to Erebor," he said, as if in the middle of a conversation she as unaware they were having. He began to move around the room casually, but did not overtly look in Hem's direction.

"You're spies are well informed," she said.

"You think it wise?"

She was well aware of everyone's opinion of Lida, but she did not care. Hem had made her decision. Hopefully, it would turn out well.

"Have we not discussed this before? I know you do not trust my judgement in this matter. You need not remind me." She wiped water off her upper lip.

"That was before you chose to keep her." Thorin was in front of her now. His eyes cut to her quickly, then away as he continued his circle about the room. "Is she recovered?"

"Sadly, she'll be scarred for life because of me. Her injuries are of such nature that she'll not be able to perform ordinary work."

"That is unfortunate, indeed, unless ordinary work in her case would be the sort to get her a quick stop at the end of a short rope."

She ignored the jab and explained through her teeth. "I'll make sure she's aided properly in her recovery and that she'll have good work when the time comes."

"What respectable master will employ a thief?" he challenged pragmatically.

"I will," she said. "I am of means now to do so."

"Employ her as what exactly?" He frowned but seemed more amused now than annoyed, his mouth twisting.

"Whatever I want. That's the beauty of havin' a thousand gold coins to spend before the year is out."

"Do not take her in simply out of guilt," he advised. "You will not want her depending on you indefinitely."

"She's already proven herself to me. She's clever and resilient."

"So is a hound or a horse, but they must still earn their keep from their mistress. Without honest skills, I fail to see what she can do to rectify her past."

Hem found her voice rising with emotion. "She may only be a thief, but she's my thief. I'll not leave her to beg on the street or to sell her body which are the only options available to a poor soul like her."

"No pleasure house will have a thief, so you need not fear. They would have no business at all unless strict regulations protected their patrons as well as their merchandise."

"Well then," she settled, clapping her hands together. "A beggar she shall be. Gratitude to you, Sire, for sortin' that out," she said sarcastically.
Thorin laughed, a proper laugh showing white teeth through his black beard, transforming his visage completely. It stunned her momentarily, making her forget her anger. And she was not really angry at him; she knew that he would have done the same in her stead and that he only debated the issue of Lida because he disliked the idea of her. He had never even met the dwarf in question.

"Hem," Thorin said, still smiling. "You will, of course, do as you wish, as I am convinced you would in spite of any reservation of mine."

True. She had not asked his permission for moving Lida to Erebor. She did not need it.

"I'm invested in her future," she simply said. "And I'm told I may hire whomever I like."

She could see him nod sagely, before replying, "Aye, that is true," and falling silent once more.

"Are you badgerin' me about this to reserve the right to say 'I told you so' in the future?"

Thorin huffed, out of amusement or annoyance—who could tell? "Please believe I come only with good intentions."

She was not sure he spoke in earnest or in jest, but she held her tongue.

"However," he continued, "now that you mention it, time will tell, naturally, as with all things, whether I am correct in my misgivings."

And there it was. He seemed far too confident that he was in the right. It riled Hem more than she liked to admit.

"You may take your good intentions with you when you leave, Sire," Hem said with a light, breezy voice, "and give them to someone more likely to be swayed by your unsought advice."

He laughed lightly at that, stopping at her back. "I did not come to provoke you."

From the corner of her eye, she saw him reach out and trace the path of a drop of water from her shoulder to her neck, then tucking a stray wisp of hair behind her ear.

"Could've fooled me," Hem muttered, distracted by his light touch.

"My initial errand was to beg your attendance at dinner with the merchant guild this evening."

Hem groaned from a combination of his light caress at the base of her neck and exasperation at the guild and their procedures. She had been a member for a long time but not active since her return from Tirith. They were a bunch of pretentious, smug, smirking salesmen; and she was in no hurry to reacquaint herself with them.

"Forgive me, Your Highness, but I am not in the least tempted to accept your dinner invitation," she said through a smile. "And you should know better than to question my intelligence before askin' a favour."

"I may question your reasoning, but I do trust you to handle it." Thorin's finger began rubbing over stiff tendons in her shoulder, and she let her head droop forward to allow him access. "What if I should ask most courteously?" he said suddenly low and husky as his fingers softly spread a warm burn where they pressed on spent muscles.

"Mm," Hem said, in thought as well as pleasure at his touch. "I haven't said no... yet."
"Sounds promising." He continued his ministrations. "How is your shoulder?"

"If you'd asked yesterday, the answer would have been 'fine'. But as it is, Dwalin's pushed me to the edge of consciousness this afternoon."

Thorin's hand stilled, then started up again much lighter. "That son of Fundin is an audacious, ill-bred boar." He sighed, reining in his temper. "But he is the most skillful warrior I have ever encountered."

Hem recognised the unspoken sentiment. If Dwalin thought the training necessary, not even Thorin would criticise his methods.

"So I've heard. Lucky me." Hem's eyes fluttered close, relishing in his continued attentions. "I'm sure the aches will pass with time. Until then, wine will probably help."

She was rewarded with another chuckle.

"Speaking of wine," he began. Then she heard him shift, and his next words were spoken much closer. "What if I should ask my dear wife if she would, please, allow me the honour of her presence at dinner and provide me with the strength and solidarity I need to anchor me and stop me from unleashing violence on some insufferable, old dwarrows? I guarantee she will be offered the best grapes east of the Misty Mountains."

This time Hem laughed, though it was a breathy sound over the rushing blood which was accelerated by his lips where they hovered so close to her ear. "Well, if there's wine, how can I refuse such a request?" she asked dryly.

"Is that supposed to count as reply?"

She smiled over her shoulder. Mahal, he was close. He was leaning in, bracing his hands on the edge on either side of her.

"Of course, I'll be there if you want me to," she said.

"I would rather see you spared even if I can't be, but alas, I will admit to being selfish upon occasion. This being one of those occasions." His voice was a low rumble, almost like a purr in its volume, and it played a sensuous melody on chords in Hemery's body. Her smile faltered when she met his intent gaze, and the heat that spread through her core had little to do with the warm water.

It occurred to her that, after their discussion the other night, he might be waiting for her to initiate physical intimacy between them. Perhaps he needed to make sure she wanted it. Hem tilted her chin up toward him, and Thorin brushed his lips against hers in a ghost of a kiss.

"Am I awake?" she asked in the space between their mouths.

"You most certainly are."

He kissed her with determination this time but no less chaste, a mere press of his mouth against hers. An errant hair from his beard tickled the corner of her mouth. She slowly unfurled one arm, reached up, and grasped the back of his head, pulling him down to her more firmly. They shifted then, mouths tasting each others' upper and lower lip in turn, and one of his hands left the edge of the tub and skimmed her arm, down her shoulder, over the scar, and down her chest to graze her breast, lightly brushing the nipple.

There was a knock on the door. Hem jumped. Thorin pulled back his hand as if burned, water
splashing from where he disturbed the water. As he straightened, Hem noticed his sleeve was sopping wet. Obviously, he had not thought—or cared—to fold it before plunging it into the water.

He moved to the doorway, calling out, "What?" The change in his voice from soft and subdued to loudly irate was jarring in its instancy.

It was Steig who answered, from two doors away if Hem wagered a guess. "The guild awaits, Your Highness."

"Let them wait," Thorin barked, but it was followed by his shoulders slumping with a sigh that Hem suspected was resigned. Disgruntled, he shook his arm, sending a shower of drops to the stone floor with a hard patter. She chuckled at his annoyed face.

"Damn foolish," he muttered, pushed his coat off his shoulders, and hung it over a chair. Then he began unlacing his shirt at the throat. When the collar could be opened enough, he gripped the back of it and pulled it over his head, removing it in one tug.

Hem was fascinated by the way his shoulders rolled with the motion, tightening and expanding beneath smooth skin. The desire his touch had triggered in her did not lessen by the observation of such a casual task as removing a shirt and hurling it into a laundry basket in economic, precise moves which testified to absolute self-awareness and control over his body's strength. She suppressed the longing she felt watching him pick his coat up to leave.

"Was this some kind of revenge for when I came upon you in the bath that time?" she asked before he disappeared through the door.

He stopped, turning halfway and thus giving her the most beautiful view of his broad chest tapering down to a narrower but still solid waist, the muscles of one arm bunching gratifyingly as he carried his coat. Then, once more, he approached her. And once more, he towered over her and leaned in until his lips caught hers.

Deep breaths fanned over her cheek as if he tried to inhale her as well as devour her. Attempting to steady herself, Hem twisted and rose onto her knees in the tub to meet him. Cool air hit her skin as her chest emerged from the water. Hot palms settled on her back, allowing her to lean back and open up more fully to his overwhelming presence. As her hands grasped his arms, one of his own slid forward to glide a rough thumb over the flesh of her breast just as his tongue flicked hers.

With one last thorough press of his lips to hers, he pulled back from her embrace. He seemed to sigh, nostrils flaring with unhidden tension as he glanced down from her face to her naked chest and back. Then he finally replied, deadpanned, "I do not know to what you are referring," and left.

Hem smirked and sunk back down into the water until it reached her chin. Then she softly touched her breast like Thorin had done, recollecting the sensation and attempting to duplicate it. And wondering when she might feel him do it again.

Knowing she would not be disturbed in her chambers again until it was time for dinner, she allowed her thoughts and her hands to wander, bringing herself pleasure for the first time since their trip to Blackwater. The months after were too clouded by worry and violence for her to ever be in the mood for such diversion. But Hem confessed that before that, on long nights in the dark winter, her mind had circled back to Thorin every time she touched herself. Of all things in her life that had changed over the past year, this was not one of them.
Another nightmare ripped Hemery up out of her sleep that night, like a fish yanked from the depth of a river by a hook on a line. As if alerted by the sudden tension in her limbs, the king too was roused from his sleep as soon as she opened her eyes.

"What do you see?" Thorin whispered hoarsely when she finally she calmed down after long silent moments. He lay behind her, wrapping an arm around her shoulder in a comforting embrace.

"Wolves." The word broke in half as she spoke, and she cleared her throat. "Chasin' me through the dense trees. Can't see where I'm headed, don't know where I am. But I keep runnin' deeper into the woods until I fall. Far, far down into darkness." She could still sense the cold grip on her body from the pressure of some unknowable cage. "And then I wake."

Thorin offered no hollow sentiments of consolation, did not try to remind her that it was not real, that there was nothing to be afraid of. None could prevent minds from conjuring what they set themselves to. The images came every time she slept, and with them came the terror.

"Do you wish to be left in peace?" he asked. His arm loosened as he said it, as if ready to move away.

Hem was already left too much in peace, she thought. Thorin always came late to bed, and tonight had been no exception. He had not returned to their chambers until long after she fell asleep, held up by the guild or some other duty; she could not be bothered to keep track of even half his responsibilities.

"No," she replied, lifting her own arm to cover his and weaving their fingers together in front of her chest.

When he did not ask any more questions, she closed her eyes in a new attempt at sleep. With a sigh, she tried to expel the memories flashing unbidden beneath her eyelids.

"I can feel them breathin' down my neck, and snarlin' in my ears," she said, almost voiceless.

She felt Thorin press a kiss to her hair.

"Do not be alarmed," he said, the warmth of his words spreading to her as he stayed close like that. "It is most likely my huffing and snoring that invade your sleep and disturb you."

She laughed lightly and raised his knuckles to her lips. His skin was dry and warm, his body heavy and safe against her back. But when his fingers relaxed against hers and his breathing grew deep once more, Hem's did not.

Thorin was gone when she woke, as usual. No matter. Hemery had her own duties to attend to. Or rather, promises to keep.

Vannur and Bror were dressed for travel when she met them outside the royal chambers. She smiled at them in greeting and approval.

They moved down the corridor while they debated weather conditions and means of transportation for their day trip to Esgaroth. Bror raised concerns about dark clouds looming menacingly on the horizon, but Hem was not about to be discouraged by a little rain. Bror spoke up again, probably to argue, when a voice called out sharply and accusing, startling Hem.
"You cannot, for the life of you, stay in one place for three straight days, can you?" Kíli called out. Astutely, he had taken in the sight of her in leather trousers beneath her long riding coat. It was the same style of dress she wore when they left Tirith together, only made from much more expensive material. Except for the trousers which she had made herself this last winter.

"What can I say? I'm only content when my rear hurts and I stink of horse shit," she replied sarcastically as he fell into step with her on his way through the south wing. "I leave the sittin' around to you."

"Witty as always, my queen, but you know very well that I just came back from that dung-infested, wobbly raft of a town," he countered, offended, with a finger pointed in her face. "I bloody well deserve some sittin' down. As long as it's not at a desk, writing reports or testimonies," he added, shuddering in disgust. "I hereby renounce quills and once more grip my arrows. From now on, I reject reading in candle light in favour of . . . of . . ."

He flailed his hand, searching for words.

". . . Of practicing my shooting on magpies or crows or anything, really, as long as it has nothing to do with black powder or cowardly burglars. I don't care. I would rather sit indoors and polish my chainmail all summer than go for even one measly pint down in Lake Town."

Kíli did not sound as if he was stopping his rambling anytime soon, not even when they saw Sethie waiting for them outside the small breakfast room where he usually ate with Fíli and his family.

"I would only tax myself to once more study by flickering candle light in such case as the object illuminated would be the soft flesh and lush curves of a dwarf lass so sweet—" His words were spoken in general, but his hand motioned to the servant in front of them, turning the rant into the beginning of a poorly improvised, rhythmless verse.

"Harbour no illusions, Prince Kíli," Sethie interrupted with a patient, close lipped smile. "It has been a long time since your charms held any power over me. If ever."

"Oh, well. It was worth a go," Kíli said, shrugging.

"And I'm no lass to you, Sire," Sethie continued. "I'm older than you."

"Apologies, Miss Sethie," he said, as respectfully as he was able. "Enjoy the knowledge that you have already ruined my prospects for the day, and it's not even past breakfast."

"Oh, aye." Sethie nodded in mock sympathy. "Princes always carry the heaviest burdens, do they not?" She offered an exaggerated pout.

Kíli ignored the jesting and agreed as if she had expressed a genuine opinion. "We do, indeed, my lady," he said, heading for the breakfast room.

Hem spoke up before he disappeared. "Perhaps try to not refer to the woman in question as an object to be studied," she encouraged. "Just a thought."

"Don't you have somewhere to be, Aunt?" he threw back with a frown.

Sethie snickered as the door closed, then she spoke to Hemery. "All is ready for your return, Your Highness. A bed has been prepared for the uthrab at the healers', and horses have been brought for your descent into madness."

"Watch your tongue," Hem warned. "The others will take after you. If you are disrespectful, so will
everyone else be. I'll have none speak of her that way once she is here, do you hear me?"

Sethie rolled her eyes but nodded. "Aye."

Hem went on. "She is leavin' all that behind. And I need your help to keep it that way and for her to feel welcome here. This is the home of her forefathers as well as yours."

Sethie turned serious at that. "As you wish."

Hem put her hand on Sethie's arm. "Thank you."

Hemery was restless. She thought it was due to her sleepless nights and the nerves she developed at the thought that Lida might not be accepted in Erebor and that perhaps she would not like it there.

But even after getting on the road to collect Lida and finally see her safely to Erebor, she could not relax. Her back ached, stiff, as they rode down the mountain, and she could hardly sit still in the boat on the last stretch as they approached Esgaroth, twirling her rings around and around her fingers. The house of healing lay just by the northern harbour, and Hem jumped out as soon as she could, eager to get this day over with and return home.

Lida wore robes of raw, undyed linen covering her wounds from the neck down, with long sleeves and a hood that she folded up when they left the healers. Hem did not blame her. The scarring on Lida's face was still healing, and her eye was uncanny in its deformity. It still moved in tandem with its twin, creating an illusion of health which was subverted by the reptile pupil.

The restlessness had turned to anxiety as the day wore on, and Hem even forewent speaking to the healers about Lida's future care, in favour of leaving for Erebor sooner. She could just as well have Elín request the details by letter, she reasoned as she paid the healers for Lida's treatment, making sure they departed as soon as they were able.

Lida had to walk with a crutch. This surprised Hem, who morosely added the newly revealed injury to the long list of debts to repay. But Lida would not appreciate being coddled, so Hem did not ask to aid her physically, settling for hovering near her on their way to the dock. She had to restrain herself from urging her to move faster. She hardly even took the time to speak to Lida before they were safely in the boat on their way back.

"What are you looking for?" Lida asked.

"What?" Hem replied, confused as she focused on the dwarf in front of her.

Lida sat clutching the railing. Dwarves were not fond of water, Hem recalled. Perhaps rightly so, in this case. The water of the Long Lake and the river that fed it sprung from wells within the mountain and from the snow that slowly melted at its peak. Even in summer, its water ran cold and its current swift. One would not fare well if accidentally plunged into it, neither men nor dwarves.

She tugged her cloak tighter around her. The rain which the clouds had threatened with all day had now begun to fall. Bror did not say 'I told you so', but Hem could feel the sentiment in the deep set of his brow beneath his helmet.

"You keep looking at the trees, like you're searching for something," Lida explained.

Was she? Perhaps. There was not much else to look at except for the scenery passing by. She looked again.

The riverbank was steep, the river washing it away little by little, season by season, exposing tree
roots and boulders from under sandy earth. Above it, pines and evergreens filtered the daylight, growing thick enough to completely black it out in the thick of the forest.

"And you're awfully quiet. You haven't apologised or admonished me in hours."

"It's chilly," Hem said tersely. "Don't feel like makin' small talk today."

As she watched, shadows moved among the trees. Was it only a trick of the grey light, movement created in dark patches by the slight rain? She could see Lida follow her line of sight, glancing at the tree line.

Lida's good hand came down to cover Hem's where she held them in her lap. Lida stared at her, frowning in trepidation, as if afraid that Hem would lash out.

"There's nothing there," Lida said, shaking her head after a moment, her eyes cutting from their hands to her face and back.

Hem looked down at her closed fists and slowly opened her right hand. It took great effort, like her fingers were locked in place. Shivering slightly, the tips of her fingers came loose from her palm where the nails had dug into thin skin, leaving red crescents behind.

When Lida removed her own hand, Hem slowly opened the left as well. Blood stained not only her fingernails but also her rings. She tried to wipe it away with her sleeve, but then she caught sight of the pale stone on her left hand.

She did not remember putting it on this morning. It looked odd next to her wedding rings, the flat, milky quartz seemingly plain and inconsequential but somehow eclipsing the red and blue jewels next to it.

She attempted to clean the flecks of blood, but it only smeared the surface, settled in the grooves and edges, impossible to get at with only cloth. Then, before her eyes, the blood suddenly faded, like water drying on a hot stove, or as if it was being drawn into the stone itself, absorbed. Just like that, the ring was clean, the gem clearer, more like smoky crystal than whitish opaque.

Then a scent hit her nose. Smoke. Fire. And a whine, like from a crying child, reached her ears.

"Did you hear that?" Hem whispered.

"Hear what?" Lida asked.

A keening, a wailing lamentation, almost like a waving song, from the trees.

"Stop!" Hem called out to her companions.

The dwarves who were charged with rowing froze with their oars over the surface of the water. Her guards stared at her. Bror in annoyance. Vannur with confused concern.

But the song carried still, though muted by wind and weather. She knew it was not safe, felt her hands shake in apprehension and fear, but she had to find it.

"Take me ashore, right now," she ordered.

"My Lady," Vannur began, calm and methodical, "I would strongly advise against—"

"Didn't you hear that?"
Hem looked back to the shore, scouting up and down the treeline. There was no sound except the crows cawing above the pines and the way the oars cut through the water as the dwarves attempted to keep them from drifting downstream.

"Take us ashore, at once," she called out again, motioning to the east bank.

Slowly, the dwarves immersed their oars deeper into the river, pushing them steadily closer to the shore.

"I'm afraid to ask, but why stop here? This is no man's land. We are still outside Erebor's border," Vannur said.

"There was someone cryin'," Hem explained, still focused on the trees.

The shadows there danced behind the veil of rain. She could not make out much, but she had to know what was hidden there.

"What if . . . someone was hurt?" she went on, not really believing it herself, but she had look. "We couldn't just pass without . . . finding the source."

Finally, the dwarves managed to close the distance between the boat and the riverbank, positioning them parallel to the edge. The side and the bottom of the boat rubbed harshly against the sand.

As Hemery rose from the narrow, wooden seat, Lida clutched her hand again.

"Don't," Lida whispered, fearful.

Hem looked down at her hand. Lida's clung to Hem's fingers, holding tightly round the pale, bloody ring, trying to stop her from going.

Immediately, Hem tore away from her grip, wanting Lida nowhere near her ring. Wanting to get away from Lida's cloying concern, away from the growing desperation in her eyes which no longer seemed divided but worked as one, both showing equal parts anxiety. How could the injured eye emit such vivid emotion? How could the dragon eye look straight through Hem? Like the eye of a witch.

"Don't go, I beg of you," Lida said, louder.

But Hem turned away, quickly stepping off the boat. Grasping a low hanging branch, she heaved herself up the bank, her feet sliding in the mud and sand, her coat tails dipping into the river before she got her bearings on the steep ground. Bror and Vannur followed closely after, burying their axes into the soil for leverage as they climbed.

Once she was over the edge of the riverbank, the ground seemed steady under her feet, covered as it was by moss, rocks, and pine needles. Trees grew close, as if there was not a four foot drop into a deep river just on the other side. The thin rain turned into heavy drops coming down from the treetops, making loud patters as they fell onto her coat. She pushed her hood back in order to see and hear her surroundings better.

She walked straight ahead, without justifying her course to her guards. Everything looked the same in the gloom. No paths were discernible on the forest floor, no brighter clearings were visible beyond boulders or up the hill, but she moved without hesitation. The goal was not in front of her but shone like a light in her mind, somehow piloting her body like a vessel.

She could vaguely register Vannur talking again.
"There's nothing here, My Lady. No trace of predators nor of prey."

Hem kept going. She could feel dry twigs scratch her face now and then, but she did not care.

"It would be foolish to conduct a more thorough search in this weather," Vannur tried again. "I must insist we return to the boat."

Hem stopped. There it was again, the smell of smoke. She angled her head toward Vannur and Bror.

"There. Can you tell?" she asked.

The dwarves looked at each other.


"From there, further east," Vannur confirmed, pointing. "Right where we've been heading all along." She shared another look with Bror, but Hem could not tell what they were thinking.

Taking no heed, she charged on through the brush. The scent grew stronger until, finally, Hem saw true movement up ahead. She continued more slowly, carefully watching her target.

A figure moved around and around a campfire. An aimless, ceaseless motion. Coming closer still, watching half hidden between the trees, Hem could make out the shape of a person, cloak hanging damp and heavy from narrow shoulders, and loose, black hair framed a pale face. The hands being wrung compulsively featured slim fingers with bony knuckles, resembling the talons of a bird.

Vannur lay a hand on Hemery's shoulder, reminding her silently to approach with caution. Hem, in turn, turned to meet her guards' eyes, raising a finger to her lips. Bror looked between her and the stranger, but nodded in acquiescence.

They kept to the shadows while Hem stepped into the clearing, making her presence known. The stranger froze, whipping around toward the sound of Hem's footsteps.

It was a woman of mankind, Hem realised, who was watching her with wide eyes, suspicious and apprehensive like a hawk. She was older, as well, hair containing more grey than black at closer inspection, though the weather had darkened the shade significantly.

"Who goes there?" the woman snapped.

Hem displayed the empty palms of her hands as she neared.

"I mean you no harm," she answered. "I noticed the fire. It's unusual to camp so close to Esgaroth without enterin' the city. Do you need help?"

"I need not your help, child."

Hem was not convinced that this was true since the woman's eyes were red and tired. She revealed a slight limp as she moved back to the other side of the camp, keeping the fire between them. Also, the dress beneath her cloak was torn and dirty, and her hair was knotted and unkempt, as if she had been out there in the forest for quite some time. But there were no supplies around the fire or even a bed roll.

Before Hem could ask what the woman was doing there, she went on.

"Who are you? Are you here to kill me, as well?"
Hem shook her head in denial. "No, I come to offer aid. I told you, I mean you no—"

"Yes, yes, they all say that, do they not?" the woman interrupted. "I have half a mind to let you, you know."

But the woman's defensive stance, her chin held high and hands fist ed in her skirt as if the folds concealed a weapon, belied the statement.

"Why would I want to kill you?" Hem asked, but she was ignored.

"How do you think you'll best me?" the woman challenged. "A sword would be the honourable way, I suppose, but too ostentatious, too slow. And you don't carry anything from what I can see."

Her gaze travelled up and down Hem's form, eyes twitching in jerky motions like a crow. She continued, and Hem allowed her.

"A knife, then. Easy enough to hide and then stab in my back after I invite you to the hearth in good faith. The way one would punish traitors and avenge blood offenses, butchering them in alleys or dark forests, leaving them to bleed out alone and unwitnessed. Why not rip out my eyes and teeth as well? Cut my heels so I can't run, and break my fingers so I can't defend myself. Cut my hair so my family wouldn't recognise me if I had any left to mourn me . . ."

Hem had only ever heard of one person to cut the hair of those who offended her. Only one person to ever have spoken with such distrust and contempt. But everyone thought she was dead—

"What happened to your family?" Hem asked, though she had a strong suspicion of what the answer would be.

"Everything's been stolen from me. A home burnt to the ground, a husband burned with it. A daughter abducted. Two sons slain. All that remain is my life, and it's no good anymore."

"Lady Brage?" Hem said, to see if the woman would confirm the name.

Her movements were short and strenuous when she came round the fire once more to focus on Hem. "Not anymore," the woman finally replied, low and dejected.

So Agnes Brage had survived the fire that destroyed the Brages' house at Blackwater. Had she gone looking for Asta in the chaos that ensued, thinking she had run into the forest again? Or had she fled the town, fearing the repercussions of keeping her daughter captive for almost twenty years? Or had she simply not trusted the good will of the townspeople after her home went up in flames, Lord Brage having perished within? Perhaps she had not been oblivious as to her standing among them, but knew full well that they were waiting for the perfect moment to overthrow her and her husband, waiting for a weakness to present itself, to end the reign of the Brage family?

Hem found herself running a finger across the scar on her neck, feeling a kind of sick satisfaction in seeing Lady Brage in tatters, a ghost of her former, menacing self. She had caused Hemery and Hanah a lot of pain, as she had done to plenty of others, and now the day of reckoning had come. Or rather, it seemed to have already arrived some time ago.

"Why do you hide here? Why do you not return home?" Hem asked.

"The monsters," Agnes whispered, looking around. "They hunt me."

Hem's eyebrows rose. The lady had clearly lost her sanity sometime in the last ten years.
Agnes went on, more agitated. "I can't escape these woods. They hunt me, never letting me leave. They eat men, sometimes before you're even dead. Always hungry, no matter how much they feed."

Could she possibly be telling the truth, Hem wondered? These monsters Agnes spoke of sounded awfully familiar.

"Do you mean to say that orcs hunt in this forest?" Hem asked, growing worried.

"Hush, child," Agnes hissed. "Demons come when summoned. I used to be able to hear them and see them, sense their presence before they attacked. But I lost it. Now, they appear from the shadows, at any time."

The woman's account was so fragmented and distorted that it was difficult for Hem to judge her credibility. She had always seemed deranged to Hem, but now even more so. Then again, orcs had indeed attacked Blackwater which was only a day's ride east. It was not impossible that a small number still dwelled in the region, the dense forest with its rocky hills and caves providing enough shelter for them. And Hem knew that some people had left Blackwater when they heard the orcs were coming, too afraid to stay and fight. Farmers and crafters would have been scattered all over the land, aiming for Esgaroth or the Iron Hills, all easy pickings for orcs, who were used to hunting and killing.

"When did you last see these . . . monsters?" Hem pushed, impatient.

"Yesterday. They came as I made camp. They overwhelmed me, stole all my things."

Hem's eyes swept over the forest floor, again disturbed by the lack of supplies. Agnes could be telling the truth, she admitted ruefully. Then, Hem's eyes settled on the fire.

"Have you been makin' fire everywhere you settle?" Hem asked, incredulous.

Agnes turned to the flames, warming her hands, all the while wringing them until her knuckles went white.

"It's all I can use against them. I have no weapons."

"But it's how they find you," Hem said, sharply. "The smoke. It's how I found you, and it's allowin' the orcs to track you."

She walked up and kicked the pile of burning sticks, swiftly separating them, and then stepping on them, breaking them up into little pieces. The flames grew small and slow. Without the close contact of other branches, they would soon go out.

"No," Agnes shrieked.

She grasped Hem's wrist, attempting to wrestle her away from the fire. That was when Vannur and Bror decided to intervene, refusing to stand idly by. Violence on the queen surpassed the vague request from Hem that they remain hidden.

Shocked at seeing dwarves bearing down on them, Agnes recoiled, but did not relinquish her grip on Hem.

"Stay back, dwarf scum!"

The guards paused just out of reach, sword and axe raised, waiting for Agnes to make a single
wrong move. She was unarmed, after all.

As Agnes was preoccupied with watching the dwarves as closely as they watched her, her eyes brimming with hate, Hem twisted out of her hold and reversed their positions until she had Agnes on her knees, back against Hem's front, arms crossed and locked. Agnes screamed and bucked, surprisingly strong for an older woman.

"You need to calm down," Hem said through her teeth, tightening her grip until Agnes quietened enough to hear her. "You might not remember me, but I've waited a long time to meet you again. Now, I know you hate dwarves more than anythin', and nothin' would please me more than to take them back with me, out of your sight, and leave you here. Most of them hate you too, you know, which should come as no surprise. Mahal knows I do. But if there's one thing we hate more, it's orcs. And if you want to live, you'll come with us, right now."

"Never," Agnes spat. "I'd rather rot out here than be forced to look at another one of those greedy, spineless, inbred pigs."

Hem laughed, humourless. "That's funny. They say the same about you, m'lady."

"They have taken her. They took my daughter!"

"No dwarf ever laid hands on your lass." Hem snorted. "Did it ever occur to you that maybe Asta ran away from you, all on her own? She burned your bloody house down to get out of there, to no longer be your prisoner."

"I keep her safe. I always do. Everything I do is for her."

Hem froze then. Agnes had no idea what had happened to her own daughter.

"Asta is dead," Hem said simply.

Agnes stilled, but shook her head. "No. No, no. I'll find her. She's waitin' for me."

"She died the night the orcs came to Blackwater. All your work for nought. All those years lockin' her in the attic, wasted. You can't save someone who doesn't want to be saved."

"It never stops," Agnes muttered to herself. "It's in the ground, in the skin, the blood, the dreams." A chant without reason or rhyme.

The old woman's shattered mind unsettled Hemery profoundly. She shook Agnes slightly, attempting to catch her attention and draw her out of her own head.

"Listen—" Hem tried, but was interrupted.

"You lie! All lies. Always lies." Her cries became sobs.

"Listen to me," Hem said, louder this time. "As much as I'd wish to, I can't leave you here. You must—"

But Agnes shouted, hoarsely and broken. "Just kill me, now. Spare me the suffering. Just kill—"

Something whistled through the air, cutting off her words. The shaft of an arrow protruded from Agnes' chest, crude fletchings jutting out from its tail.

"They're here," Bror growled, moving to stand in front of Hem in the direction from which the arrow came.
Hem stared at Agnes where she slumped in her arms. It was as if the gods themselves had heard the woman's prayer and granted it. But she was not dead yet. When Hem moved to release her, Agnes clutched at her hands. Still strong and stubborn though Hem could see the life steadily pumping out of her chest. The arrow was buried deep between her ribs, perhaps damaging her heart, but most certainly puncturing her lung if her raspy breath was anything to go by. She might have had hours or only moments left, but either would be a tortuous eternity with an orc blade wedged in her organs.

"We mustn't linger," Vannur said curtly. "We must go. Now."

Faintly, Hem could hear the shuffling through leaves and bushes, the unearthly screeches that matched those in her memory all too well. How could they have hit a target at such distance? The woods were too dark and dense. But of course, orcs thrived in darkness. The poor weather and the terrain allowed them to move whenever they wished.

Hem tried to stand, but Agnes held her fast. Her lips were stained red, but her eyes were glued to Hem's hand. Did she not wish to die anymore? Had she changed her mind as she stared death in the eye?

It was too late, though. Her injury was too great. And they could not carry her, or they would all die. Hem pulled free from Agnes desperate hands, and rushed back to the cover of the trees on the other side, Vannur and Bror following closely.

Before ducking out of sight, she looked back one last time just as two orcs burst into the clearing, coming down on Agnes with sharp, armoured knees and biting fingers until she lay face down on the forest floor, the arrow bending, breaking, and pushing further into her chest. These two orcs were the first of many, Hem reflected, hearing the rest not far behind.

One fisted a filthy hand in Agnes' hair, pulling her head back and exposing her throat. The other produced a dagger, slowly tracing her lower eyelid, as if enjoying the moments before the kill. Hem could see Agnes chin and lips move, perhaps trying to speak, helpless under the weight of the orc and paralysed by her wound, but still conscious, still suffering, knowing with painful certainty what was about to happen.

"You cannot help her," Vannur whispered.

Without thinking, Hem drew one of her knives and threw it. Before she realised what she had done, the blade had found its mark in Agnes' neck, spilling her blood quickly in thick gushes. In moments, she would faint, no longer feeling, hearing, or seeing whatever the orcs had planned for her. Soon after, she would pass away, free of everything.

But by throwing the knife, Hem had revealed her position. The orcs in the clearing, steadily increasing in number—a dozen, maybe more—turned their eyes on her.

"Run," Vannur hissed. "Now." She pushed at Hem's shoulder for her to move, though all three of them were already in motion.

A dissonant horn sounded from somewhere behind them, making chills run down Hem's spine, and she ran until she tasted iron, jumping over rocks and fallen logs. She knew that sound. That horn had been blown as dusk fell on Blackwater that spring.

Another arrow whistled past, making her duck and swerve left to round a cluster of thorny bushes, the arrow hitting the trunk of a tree somewhere in front of her. She did not pause to see how many pursued or how closely, just kept running.
Hem heard Vannur call out something, probably her name, but she was too far away. And Hem was not even sure she was running in the right direction anymore when suddenly she saw the brightness of the grey sky through the trees up ahead.

There. The river, she thought, and forced her tired body onward.

The ground disappeared from under her feet as she stumbled over the crest of a hill. The hillside turned steeper still until she fell on her bottom and slid down, feet first, bringing leaves, twigs, moss, and dirt with her as she flailed for purchase. Then she fell through the air, feeling weightless for a heartbeat, before she met the ice cold water of the river, its powerful darkness dragging her down.

This was it, she thought as the current swept away all control. The mighty body of water reduced her to little more than a grain of sand being pushed along by the unstoppable force but steadily sinking. She had been here before, many times. She knew what came next, had known it for a long time. She had been shown a glimpse of the weave of fate, and only at the frayed end of her thread was she allowed to realise it.
Hemery's senses were in shock by the chill encompassing her on all sides. The cold water seeped into every crevice, into her ears and her nose, hitting her like a blow to the head, disorienting her, making her doubt what was up and what was down. She tried to swim, but her limbs were stiff in her leather coat and trousers.

Suddenly, something grabbed her wrist. Startled, she tugged on her arm before she recognised Vannur's long, black, flowing hair as the dwarf tried to pull Hem toward her. But Hem's coat had caught on something in the water—it was too dark in the muddy deep for her to see what—that dragged her back under.

Then, a touch to her ankle. A flash of silver. And the coat was torn apart from neck to waist, allowing her to shed it, while her lungs screamed at her, threatening to collapse. Free of the long coattails, she managed to kick hard enough to feel herself rise, and with Vannur's help, she could make out the light of the surface.

Her chest constricted to the point that the idea of opening her mouth and pulling a deep lungful of mountain water seemed like a blessing. But somehow, she pushed further, broke the surface at long last and gasped. She drew breath after burning breath, for drops of water that ran down her nose and mouth was pulled in with the air.

She felt hands and arms supporting her. Over the rush of water, she heard voices hollering. Fearful, she turned her head as much as she was able, but where she anticipated orcs, she saw only her own people pushing the boat in her direction. The arms holding her belonged to Vannur and Lida, and Hem could see Bror at the helm, reaching to help pull them up. She did not think she could have treaded water long by herself, tired as she was. But soon, strong hands lifted her aboard straight from the water by her collar and arms.

As soon as her knees hit the floor of the boat, she was covered with furs from the benches, and her hands were locked in warm grips. Above her, Vannur's dark hair fell like a curtain, blocking out the grey clouds. Hem must have been running far in the wrong direction for Vannur and Bror to have reached the boat before her. Dwarves always did have a better sense of direction than she had. And apparently, they could see as well in dark waters as they could in the tunnels of the mountain.

Vannur's hard eyes ran over Hem, one hand warming hers, the other prodding her skull through wet tresses, searching for injuries.

"I am well," Hem breathed out, still catching her breath.

"Are you certain?"

Hem nodded.

"Absolutely certain?" Vannur insisted.

"Aye, I am not hurt. Are you?"

Vannur snorted, but did not reply.

Hem closed her eyes against Vannur's frown and let the rain shower her face, cold but soft and gentle on her skin in comparison to what could have happened just now.
The guards still barked commands and affirmations back and forth along the large vessel, but they were moving again, the oars breaking the water in quicker strokes this time.

"They will have heard the horn from the border. Won't be long til the orcs are run off or killed," Vannur said, but it was aimed at Bror. "We let them have the north, and still, they have the gall to come so close," she spoke through her teeth.

"They're just a stragglin' raidin' party left from the assault on Blackwater. They'll roam here until there's nothin' left to rend," Hem sighed between long breaths.

"We'll smoke them out," Bror grunted back after a long moment, all the while keeping his keen eyes on the treeline.

Hemery began to shiver, her wet clothes keeping her cold despite the thick sheep furs, and Vannur made her sit up on one of the benches.

"At least we now know what happened to the Brages," Vannur muttered while she wrapped a sheepskin around her own shoulders, as well. She had apparently removed her armour, helmet, and sword harness before diving in. "And we can handle those orcs before they hurt anyone else."

She kneeled beside Hemery, unlaced Hem's boots, and pulled them off. Then she brought another fur from one of the benches to cover Hem's feet, and sat down next to her, wrapping one arm around Hem's torso. Vannur was keeping her warm. Though it was summer, the harsh weather and the cold river could still damage a vulnerable body.

After a moment, Lida too moved from her seat opposite Hem and slowly lowered herself to sit next to her, mimicking Vannur.

"Careful," Hem said, not wanting Lida to hurt herself. "What were you thinkin', exertin' yourself like that? You're still healin'."

Lida threw a knife on top of Hem's water-soaked boots. It was one of hers, the one she usually had stuffed into her boot, just as she had today. Lida had been the one to cut the coat open with Hem's own knife to free her. Hem had not known that Lida even knew about the knives.

"Heed your own advice now and then, Your Highness," Lida replied. "You should be more careful."

Hem caught Lida's eye, remembering how she had tried to stop Hem from going into the forest. Hem did not regret it, but she could admit that it had been at great risk. Very great.

"Not another word," Hem warned Lida through shattering teeth. She did not wish to hear any 'I told you so's.

"You should stop talking. Save your strength," Lida said, unbothered by Hem's warning.

In spite of how close she had come to death this day, Hemery felt strangely elated. Tears gathered in her eyes, not only from relief at having escaped, but also because of once more having someone die in front of her, a death she quickened, even if it was someone she herself had wished death upon countless times before. Death was always ugly; orcs or men, friends or enemies—it did not matter.

She clung to the warmth of Lida's and Vannur's hands around hers, and let the river, that almost drowned her, carry her upstream.
"Aye, save your breath for the king," Vannur agreed.

"Bloody Mahal," Hem sighed.

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The hot water of her bath never felt so good, so soothing, until that evening when Hemery returned to Erebor. Her supper never tasted so good, so satisfactorily rich. Clean, dry clothes had never warmed so much. The royal chambers had never impressed her more, their silence and safety were never as calming, the luxury and comfort never as appreciated as just then.

Hem stood in front of the fire in her dressing gown, combing her drying hair, when Thorin came in. She could hear his heavy footfalls as he approached through the chain of rooms. He seemed to be in a hurry, agitated.

Seeing her, he growled, "Mahal's blood, woman." An admonition and a curse.

He came to her where she stood, grasped her face in his large, rough hands, and kissed her.

Though she was surprised by his boldness, she welcomed it. The kiss was devouring, wet, hot, and hard and impatient like his mood, and did not allow her to shift an inch before he was done. The comb hung forgotten from loose fingers as she tried to keep up with him, to cling with her arms around his neck.

When he pulled back, she saw his temper flare, the one he seldom directed at her but often at others.

"Will you explain to me the reasoning behind your conduct? Or shall I be forced to put my trust in your guard rather than in you?"

It was not so much an accusation as it was a warning, his low rumble displaying frustration and aggravation. He did not need to provide context for the inquiry; she knew to what he referred. He was not happy with her actions of that day. And why would he be?

"Don't be vexed," Hem said, tightening the ties of her gown self-consciously. "I took Bror and Vannur with me this time. There was no way that anyone could have predicted what would happen—"

"That is precisely the reason one does not venture on impulsive treks through the forest—because they cannot be predicted. As far as I understand, you and your guard planned on visiting Esgaroth and coming straight back. Then you deviated from that plan. I know I promised you to be free to do as you please, but you must be careful with how you do things. You must plan for everything."

"Even pee breaks?" Hem argued obstinately, shrugging. "Sometimes one simply has to go."

His hands tightened on her arms. "You sincerely expect me to believe that was why you went into the forest and came back with orcs on your heel?" he snapped.

It could have been. It was not an outrageous idea. But Hem pursed her lips and looked away, unwilling to lie.

"Maddening, bloody woman," he bit out before his mouth was on hers again.

Thorin kissed her, if possible, even more insistently than before. One hand travelled to the back of
her neck, the other to her waist, and she came willingly when he pulled her close, guiding her against him. Her own hands came up to grasp his shoulders, steadying herself. Her lips that slanted over his opened to take more of what he offered, his force being reciprocated in her movements.

His palms were warm through the dressing gown, sliding up and down her back and sides. The heat rivaled the fire that painted Thorin's features in orange light. Soon, his mouth descended on her throat and collarbone, and moving lower to the skin on her chest uncovered by the loose neckline of the gown.

Then he paused and held her gaze as he traced his fingers along the collar and down below the gown's fabric, pushed it aside slowly—slowly enough for her to stop him if she wished—and pulled it down her shoulders, revealing her bare torso to the soft light. She released her arms from the constraining gown and put them around Thorin's neck.

Without taking his eyes off hers, he kissed her chastely, a great contrast to the utterly indecent way his hands snaked around her body and drew light patterns along her back as her breasts were pressed against the coarse wool of his shirt. His fingers became more determined, and his arms tightened around her until his lips finally returned to her chest, kissing and nipping at her with increasing fever. Hem's hands grasped his shoulders tighter, allowing the sparks from his actions to sizzle beneath her skin.

When his gaze fell upon her face once more, his hands shifted firmly from her back down to her hips. One travelled further to slip under her dressing gown which was still tied at her waist. Hem's stomach fluttered at the thought of his hands on her, nerves sending butterflies to the soles of her feet and the tips of her fingers in anticipation of the unfamiliar sensation of someone other than herself touching her there. Her mouth went dry as he watched her while his hand wandered up her inner thigh, slowly relishing the soft flesh beneath his strong hand, again giving her all the time in the world to protest. In consent, she eased her legs apart a little bit, so they would not stick together from the heat her body let off. Though saying nothing, his eyes searched her face, asking permission, begging to see her reply, and accepting every feeling she showed him.

Heat rose to Hem's face when he touched the thin skin and soft hair next to her folds, first on one side, then the other, before venturing to graze the silk in between, testing her sensitivity. Sensing the wetness gathered there, Thorin's other hand fisted in her gown at the hip, but his motions were still measured and calm, his eyes still on her face. After a moment of gentle touch, her apprehension subsided, and she could feel the first embers of pure pleasure flare to life. Her mouth opened on a silent gasp.

This time, their mouths came together violently, meeting in wonderful crashes of lips and tongues. Thorin's movements grew stronger and faster, as did Hem's breathing until she could not take pleasure in kissing him anymore but was forced to tear her lips away, unable to focus on anything other than his hand between her legs. His other hand moved from her hip, up her chest, caressing her breast a moment before continuing up to her neck where he held on, keeping her forehead pressed to his.

They stayed there, breathing each other's air, listening to Hem's gasps and hisses and sighs, their faces touching, his beard rasping against her chin, her lips grazing his cheek, until the tension grew to be too much. The climb to Hem's peak was arduous in this position, her legs growing unsteady, and Thorin's eyes were excruciatingly heavy on her, making her horribly self-conscious.

Suddenly, he wrapped one arm around her waist, firmly guiding her backwards until she sat on the edge of the bed while his other hand gripped the inside of her thigh. Thorin's mouth sought out her neck once more, tongue and teeth tasting her, and he leaned over her until she lay down, and he
could safely return his hand to her core, stoking the flames in her belly.

The sounds of her reactions and the motions of his fingers between her folds made her blush deeply, but Thorin did not seem to mind. Quite the opposite. The more she cried out and the more tightly her hands grasped his shirt, the harder his teeth worried her skin, and the more pressure he put behind his kisses, drawing her sounds out of her mouth and into his. She wanted to tell him how otherworldly the sensations felt, and how extraordinary she found it that he could make her feel this way, that he wanted to make her feel this. How she wanted it to last forever, but at the same time, she wanted the crest of the wave to wash over her as soon as possible. But all she could manage was to whisper his name over and over whenever his mouth left hers long enough for her to speak at all.

When she finally reached the highest of heights, her thighs shaking and her fingers curling on his shoulder and in his hair, she moaned against his lips as whips of lightning thrashed her for a few glorious heartbeats.

His kisses turned soft but no less persistent. In the small spaces between kisses, where lips parted and met again, he spoke in a low rumble. "My wife. My love."

Hem thought he would stop touching her once she found her release, but he did not. The hand between her legs only slowed somewhat, but not enough to let the fire die.

"Wait, wait," she gasped when her muscles began to twitch.

"Do you wish me to stop?" he said in her ear, but he did not let up. And surprisingly, she found that she did not want him to as the pressure began to build once more.

She shook her head. "No," she breathed, and he rewarded her with another long, hard kiss.

When Thorin had pushed her to another climax and still would not let her go—not that she minded—she grew restless in a new way. She pulled at his shirt impatiently.

"Take this off," she commanded, wanting to feel his skin, not the wool and linen of his clothes.

He obeyed with a grunt, annoyed at having to move away if only for a moment, tore his shirt over his head, and leaned against her again. But she was not satisfied.

Hem ran her hands over his wide back while he continued to subject her to the endless, sweet torture. Encouraged by his unrestrained familiarity with her body, she pushed her hands beneath the waist of his trousers, tugging at the fastenings.

"I want to feel you, too," she whispered against his neck.

Thorin answered in a wordless growl, returning to her mouth and licked into it for a few long moments. Then he pulled back to look her in the eye.

"Are you certain?" he said, close enough to graze her nose with the tip of his own.

She nodded. "I'm awake. I'm here." She surged up to kiss him. "I want to be here with you," she said against his lips.

Somehow, he managed to loosen his trousers and remove them without really breaking contact between their bodies. Then he moved to cover her completely, Hem's legs cradling his hips. Though her robe had slid open, the ties were still in a knot around her waist, but it did not obstruct her movements, so she was not bothered, not when Thorin was warm and hard against her.
He kissed her neck as he slowly entered her, and she pulled her knees up further at his sides in order to accommodate his weight without bruising the insides of her thighs. He began a slow pace, as if he was being careful not to hurt her, and she enjoyed the feeling of being together in such an intimate way. The way he ran his hand softly from her hip to her breast and back again, and the way his mouth mimicked the gentleness, moving much lighter against her skin than he had all night.

Hem could tell he held himself back, how Thorin's shoulders and back were tense and taught like he was keeping a great force at bay. But it did not last long. When, at last, he moved faster, showing his strength through the power and control he had on his body by knowing exactly how much she could take, he shifted to touch her again while he was inside her.

The pleasure was not the intense burning friction from before, but a steady simmer she felt could go on forever without the demand for more. Just to remain there with Thorin for all eternity would be more than she could ever dream of. Everything was suspended in the space between their bodies, where their skin connected. Nothing and everything could distract her at that moment, and she would not care.

But her body was unpredictable, and no sooner had the thought fleet through her mind when she felt herself rise to another peak. She had to break free from his mouth, facing away from Thorin to take deep breaths enough to voice her release in a sharp cry, her eyes closed.

Finally, he removed his hand, but did not stop thrusting. He seemed to lose control somewhat after bringing her to climax, breathing harder and unable to stop until he found his own. Hem kept her arms around him, relaxing and letting him do as he wished, grateful for his consideration of her pleasure, and wanting him to have his as well. She let him tighten his arms around her body, his grip almost bruising on her hips and her breasts, and let him turn her chin for him to cover her face in kisses, licking her lips, her neck, her collarbone, until Thorin buried his face between her neck and shoulder and gave up a guttural moan. His hips stillled after a moment, his body growing heavier on top of her.

He drew deep breaths through his nose while still mouthing lazily at her shoulder. When she patted his chest lightly to get him to let her up, he turned on his back but pulled her with him, so she lay on top of him instead, her dressing gown finally giving up and slipping off completely.

Their bodies disconnected as they moved, and Hem could now feel warm wetness between her legs, spreading down her thigh. In the midst of her exhaustion, the thought of bearing a child after this night invaded her mind, but after letting it settle, she found that it did not scare her as much as it once did. Everything felt as though it would be alright in the end. Which was a strange thought, one she had not entertained for years.

Laughing lightly to herself, at her unfamiliar, sudden cheer, she went to get out of bed and return to the washroom. But Thorin stopped her, holding her tighter to him.

"Stay," he said, curtly, but added the softer, "please," to better persuade her.

"There are bear skins on the bed," Hem began with a smile, where she lay on his chest. "They'll be ruined."

Swiftly, he grasped the nearest one, shifted it from under him and threw it on the floor. Problem solved, apparently.

"I want to wash up," she said, cheeks flushing.
"Leave it," Thorin replied. One of his hands travelled down to her buttocks, squeezing her unabashedly to show he did not care about issues of such arbitrary nature. "I'll see to it, later. Just stay here for now."

His other hand ran up and down her back, soothing to the point of almost lulling her to sleep. But after a long moment, Thorin spoke again.

"Tell me you did not seek out the orcs in the forest."

Hem raised her head to look at him. "Why would I seek them out?" she questioned, surprised by his words. She felt compelled to pull away, but his hands held her still, gently but firmly.

"They have appeared in your dreams for weeks. Clearly, something in their nature disturbs you. Perhaps they reflect some fear or anger within you—unresolved, insurmountable."

"Surely they do the same to you. You have more reason than most to hate orcs."

"As do you," he reminded her. "I failed to witness your recovery from Blackwater, and when you returned, your attention was drawn elsewhere. Where you able to overcome the horrors of that night?"

Overcome? She had not had much time to dwell on it. Not that she wanted to. Each time memories of blood and gore flashed in her mind, she had fortunately enough been able to push them away. But now she was not so busy during the day anymore that she could just think of something else. And perhaps the repressed thoughts made their way into her dreams instead.

She shrugged. "I don't know. How does one overcome somethin' like that?"

"You make peace with yourself. Come to terms with the outcome," he said. "Avoid second guessing your decisions, forgive yourself for those decisions, and give thanks for those who lived through it, including yourself. And you can aim for a better life where fighting is not required."

Her eyes flickered away and her heart grew heavy in her chest as she still felt responsible for the injuries inflicted on Thorin that night in Blackwater as well as the hardships put upon Lida, Vannur, and Rain.

"I do strive toward that life," she assured him. "But I always feel like there's more to be done."

"I believe that feeling will remain for the rest of your life." A smile tugged at his mouth. "I would be worried if it did not."

"But I shouldn't feel so restless, all the time. I have hardly been able to sleep, for Mahal's sake. My dreams have nearly robbed me of my sanity."

"Is that why you went into the forest to find them?"

"No." Her eyes flew back up to him. "I mean, yes. In a way. I didn't mean to, but I felt like I had to. I didn't know they'd be there."

"But you must have."

"What do you mean?"

"The dreams," he pushed. "They were all the same, every night, so you said. The forest, the pines, the beasts chasing you, and the fall into the river. Everything happened just like you dreamt it."
Hem fell quiet.

Perhaps. Her memory of the decision to enter the forest was so blurry now. It had seemed so clear at the time, but now she could not remember her reasoning. All she knew was that she had been happy to be home. Happy to the point of smiling to herself. She was content.

Suddenly, she did not want to talk about her nightmares, nor how she might or might not have seen things in the reflection of a ring, or how poor impulse control she had.

"Maybe it did," she admitted. "But it doesn't have to mean anythin'. Do I still think about Blackwater? Aye, I do—every day, in some shape or form. Doesn't mean I suffer more than anyone else from the orc attack."

Thorin was quiet a moment, seemingly contemplating her arguments. When he spoke again, the words were deliberate.

"I cannot fathom how you know these things or why you insist on seeking out danger, but I know I cannot do this," he said, sounding tired. "I cannot be afraid anymore. I will not. But I don't know what to do. I cannot protect you—I don't know how. I cannot let you go, but I cannot keep you locked away. No matter how close I hold you, you are always beyond my reach, just beyond my fingertips."

Hem lay still, fearful of his next words, as he moved to caress the back of her neck with gentle fingers.

"Tell me what to do," he said, finally turning her face up to make her look at him. The steel in his eyes was so sharp it seemed to hurt him. "Tell me how to stop this blade that pierce my liver every time you are out there, every time you are out of my sight, and faceless demons threaten to shed your blood with swords and fire."

Hemery's heart twisted in her chest. She knew he had been unhappy with her for being thoughtless in the past, but she had chosen not to dwell on exactly how much her actions had pained him. She always hoped that he would trust her again once they were married and her uncertain position in Esgaroth came to an end.

When she spoke, it was softly. "I am sorry for everythin' you are put through, but I won't take responsibility for it all. And I'm not expectin' you too either, just sayin' that there is no one at fault and not one single solution. Please, do not try to solve me like I'm a problem. Yes, problems find me. They have for some time, but I have not broken any of my promises to you. Don't live here with me and act as though every day is the last, as though it's only a matter of time before my shortcomings get the better of me. Because that I cannot do. I won't walk on eggshells around you, but you shouldn't either, because I . . . " She did not want to say it, but she knew it was for the best. "I appreciate your honesty." Even though his sincerity stung sometimes.

He grasped her hand where it rested on his chest, his concerned gaze boring into her.

"I'm afraid for you. Because of you. Afraid that circumstances will bereave me of you. I'm afraid of your bravery, that your visions and your ambition will lead you down dangerous paths."

"Well, that's a bit like the pot callin' the kettle black," she mused, trying to hold back any amusement she felt at the irony. "You, King Thorin, who defied the world to take back his homeland. Your ambition almost cost you your life, as well, but you turned out fine."

He frowned, shaking his head. "The hope you cling to is not enough for me. I must have you safe."
His hand was warm around hers.

"You managed to save a nation, but you cannot save everyone, all the time. Not in this world."

"Not if you don't want to be saved."

Hem's insides turned cold. Was that not exactly what she had told Agnes, as well?

She tried to smile in an attempt to alleviate the tense air. "And if you could keep me completely safe, there'd be no fun in the strife, would there?" she teased, but the grave lines stayed etched on his brow.

"Just remember," she went on, sober once more, "I'm here." She placed his hand on her cheek. The rough pad of his thumb caressed her skin. "I'm here now. And I'll stay here as long as I have a say in it."

A long time, Thorin regarded her where she leaned on his chest, her chin resting on the back of her hand.

"I believe you," he said finally. "It's the most peculiar thing. For the first time in months, I can see that you mean the words you speak."

Hem bristled. "I've never lied to you—"

"No, no," he said, rubbing his thumb over her cheek. "I'm not implying you did. Just that there has been a barrier between us. I could not reach you until now." His hand travelled up to tangle in her hair. "When I saw you tonight, as I came in, I felt you had come home once more. Not just returned from a days ride to Esgaroth, but truly come home."

Hem smiled through a blush. "Such spiritual revelations could easily be explained by the welcomin' warmth of my embrace, Your Majesty," she teased.

For once, he did not argue with her, only smiled that thin almost-smile of his and beckoned her closer.

"Come here," he rumbled.

She moved up his body to reach him, and he met her with a soft, patient kiss.

The next morning was no different from any other; Thorin had already risen when Hemery woke. It was no different, except that she had slept through the night. All through the night. No nightmares that she could recall, no fits of sleeplessness. She had simply slept.

Though her eyelids were heavy as they always were when she just woke, she could feel the difference in her body. Her old injuries did not bother her nearly as much as they usually did, and as she stretched beneath the covers, she felt rested in a way she had not felt in a long time. How long was it since she had slept an entire night? Before she started sleeping in the royal chambers? Before she went to Esgaroth? Before the went to Blackwater? Before she was nearly killed by orcs the first time?

Orcs.

A chill went down her spine at the thought of how things could have ended, but did not. She was
well aware how it could have gone. She had seen it before it happened. She had seen it in her sleep, and in her ring. She moved to touch the gem on her hand.

Hem's fingers were bare.

Her heart stopped and then began beating harder in her chest. Where? How? When?

She shot out of bed. The webs of sleep and the wish to simply turn over and go back to sleep had evaporated. Not even bothering to shrug into the dressing gown which had fallen to the floor during the night, she searched the bedside table, the floor, and the wash room for any sign of it. She found her wedding rings in the box next to her comb and her hair pins, where she always put them when she bathed, but the white ring was gone.

Naked, she moved from room to room, scouring every surface, looking beneath every chair, and opening every drawer. Not until she searched the table in the room next to the bedroom where she usually drank tea in late evenings did she falter in her fixed intention.

The drawer was filled with ink blotted paper, old correspondence, and sticks of wax, and she was just about to move on to the next when she noticed her name on one of the letters. Her name written in Thorin's hand.

Hem was abruptly pulled back to reality at that, and she stilled, feeling suddenly chilled by her lack of clothing. Gathering all the letters in her hands, she moved back to the bedroom, picked up her dressing gown off the floor, and settled into one of the chairs by the fire.

In the low light of the fireplace, she took in the words on top of the first page.

It began, "Dear Hemery . . ."
Dear Hemery

I trust you are well since your reports have informed me of your concluded travel and safe arrival in Minas Tirith. You will forgive me for not responding earlier. Though I was aware of your plans for some time, the news of your departure was surprising. I admit I did not believe you capable of seeing it through. You must indeed have great conviction to embark on such an unpredictable journey into a foreign land, especially while so young. To leave one's family for so long, putting so much distance between yourself and those you hold dear—I confess I cannot imagine a more unappealing course of action. I am speaking from my own experience where I would never voluntarily leave my home, during the times I have been fortunate enough to be blessed with one, unless in the most dire of circumstances.

Down all the possible paths that your choice could eventually lead you, I cannot help but see one in which there is no way back. For all of us, I fear most the one where you choose—by your own free will—to not return. Until such time when your fate has been decided, you will be missed.

The twenty-fifth anniversary of the return to Erebor is imminent. Finally, it is decided that the celebrations will coincide with the midwinter solstice. It took us five years, but it seems the teaspoon wore down the diamond at last. Only members of the merchant guild still protest the new procedure, but in all honesty, I am willing to forgo the income lost on rescheduling this calamity of a feast. The merits far outweigh the financial losses in this case, I am sure. By Midwinter's Eve, the snow will have descended and only a fraction of the regular traffic of merchants will dare venture uphill. Most will settle in Esgaroth to enjoy the benefits of proximity in their trade.

I wager Bain will not thank us for it, since Esgaroth is already overpopulated. He has not surprised me in the last ten years, so I doubt he will start now. I know you have always questioned my attitude towards him. Someday, I will tell you a story about the lord of lake town that will screw even your brazen head off its axis. However, with my luck, you will most likely take his side in the matter and ignore my experience and sound judgement, as usual.

Híli complains that she does not recollect her aunt's features. Though she receives your monthly letters, and she anticipates your distant return with a joy proportionate to a child of her age and sensibilities, she presents behavior consistent with a mourning of sorts. She feels the lack of your presence and the stability provided thereby. I am torn between whether this is sufficient reason for me to reproach you for your current occupation or if this is simply a sacrifice your family—and you—must make in order to achieve ... whatever it is you seek to achieve.

I am obligated to inform you of this consequence which you did not intend but nonetheless caused, since I am certain your sister deliberately avoids any topic that might be considered dreary in her correspondence with you. I do not blame her. She suffers your absence quietly and naturally wishes to not exacerbate things by making space for it in her letters. And she does not want to distract you by bringing bad news.

The lower levels of the north side have flooded. The council have had the pleasure of not only settling disputes between the miners who caused the leak, but also of reimbursing them for damages done and incomes lost. I am sure the pain I experienced as I signed for a dozen drums of gold to repair the tunnels should amuse you. Not that you deserve it.
The mountain is noisy of late, but somehow, it is not enough to divert me.

The weather this summer past has been too dry for the wheat. Driest in a century, some say. According to King Bard, the fields have not produced as much as predicted on his lands either. Extensive trade has been put in place for grain and root vegetables to be brought from the west, but I fear we will not receive enough before first snow and that winter will make it impossible for more to pass through the mountains. The dependence on our kin in Belegost disturbs me, though you will call it pure conceit on my part—if you know the meaning of the word. Since your studies abroad have surpassed two years, you should have learnt it by now.

Despite the dire circumstances, I can imagine your confused visage and impertinent comments about dwarves surely preferring to eat rock rather than bread. It is true that, if our stomachs allowed it, we would rather consume gems than porridge, but we also pride ourselves with offering work for those who plough the fields and harvest in our stead and with compensating them generously for their toil so we may remain in our mountain.

And now that I have answered queries before you even pose them and been offended by insolence you have yet to portray, only one more question persists, one which I must ask myself . . .

Is this illusory communication evidence of the void you have created in our midst, a void I cannot ignore or overcome without pretending you are here, speaking to me still? Or is it simply evidence that I am an old king going mad?

The merchant guild is clamouring more than usual. They wish to expand their meeting halls on the fourth floor, but Dís refuses since the house of healing is located there, claiming there can be no more traffic on that floor without disturbing the healers and their patients. The guild—your favourite people, I remember vividly—would not take no for an answer, so now both my sister and yours are campaigning to inflict an embargo on the guild. The spectacle was enjoyable, despite its complications, if only for breaking the monotony of my day.

Several months have passed since you last wrote to your sister. She is beginning to regret ever encouraging you to leave. Of course, she will never tell you this herself. Her spirit is low at times, and Fíli worries for her. This, in turn, makes my nephew inattentive in his duties, and I do not need to remind you how rash and impulsive Fíli becomes when his relations with Miss Hanah are compromised. I beg you to soon take up correspondence once more, before we all perish.

I have come to accept that I will never send any of these letters to you. It has been my suspicion for some time, though I have been unwilling to ponder it further until now. You maintain somewhat stable communications with your sister, your niece, my sister, Kíli, and I daresay even Fíli, but for reasons unknown to me, I cannot find it in myself to respond to your letters. I see them often on my desk among these notes I attempt to compose, and as often, I think I will return my attention to them later when I may have time to do them justice, but I never succeed.

There must be several reasons for this. One is that I do not believe you write me out of a sense of kinship, but rather, one of obligation. By now, you will be a young woman of men, with motivations unknown to me, settled into a life on the other side of the civilised world—if one would be so generous as to call the southern capitol of men civilised. It is apparent that you wish to inform me of your life and progress, but the goal of your mission is still a mystery to me. You are much too removed from me, by time as well as distance, for me to view your brief reports as anything other than courtesies.
Not until you return, if you ever do, will I reclaim an understanding of your ambitions.

The other reason is that I find myself revealing too much in my writing. Even as my pen blot the paper, I regret the words before they are completed.

I recall a conversation between us, quite some time ago now, where you threatened to take Kíli—your so called brother—with you when you left. I have come to wish that the offer had been sincere. His childlike tendencies have no outlet since you have been gone, and I am left to endure his self-indulgent temper and questionable wit. I am set on conjuring business for him in Minas Tirith in the coming season and have him join you, so he will have an expedition to concentrate on while I may hold court in peace. Perhaps some good will come of your absence yet.

You have been away a long while now, according to your reckoning. I, too, have begun to feel the weight of time passing. You will be considered an adult among your people. Or do you still see yourself as part of my people? I hardly know. I do not know what you look like anymore—not because I do not remember, but because you will have altered radically since I last saw you. Such is your nature, transient and transforming, and so different from my own kind.

Your letters have become sparse. I gather you have grown tired of writing to an old dwarf and receiving only silence in return. I hope your family and friends keep you sufficiently entertained when they write, as I am sure they do. The only information shared with me regarding your wellbeing is derived from Híli. No one else mentions you in conversation with me anymore.

Out of superstitious fear, I do not wish to articulate what impression the void of you has left me with, as if rendering the experience will curse you and ensure that you will never return. All I dare say is that the sensation is ghostly—your spirit tangible, but nonetheless invisible, in the periphery of my days. In unguarded moments, I forget you were ever here, only to be unpleasantly reminded of your significant absence in the next heartbeat. It is intolerable to be always aware of you in the voice and visage of your sister and in the words of your niece but never hear your unbidden opinions or crude challenges, never see that disapproving frown aimed at me, reflecting my own conscience.

The letters I have received are pale representations of your psyche, merely providing clues to the intelligent creature that I always knew you to be, who is now breaking out of the husk of childhood and reaching for the high-hanging fruit she was always denied. And though I detect the outline of a finer individual, it is unbearable to know that things will never again be what they were, when you were a child of men, the one presence I could never ignore, never dismiss, never refuse, and never fault. If you return, I fear you will no longer be a friend but will have been molded into a new, strange, unrecognizable face.

That has always been our fate. You will grow and change with the ages of men while I remain the same, most likely long after your flesh has reunited with the soil. Looking back, the entirety of your lifetime will seem no longer than the short years I have already known you, time compressing the memories into equal parts.

You have finally returned. It is much worse than I ever anticipated. You are the same, yet so different. How will I ever reconcile my memory of you with this new shell and not feel like I am betraying you? I curse my own selfish mind and treacherous flesh.
I used to believe that our affinity was ruined by your absence, and I am ashamed to say that I resented you for it. But it is now clear that it is I, and I alone, who is ruined.
In the course of the morning, Hemery attended a meeting with Dis and the school masters, but she heard little of what was discussed. She had lunch with Hanah and Híli, but she could not remember what passed between her lips. In the afternoon, she visited with Lida for a while, but the dwarf grew impatient with Hem's distracted gaze and told her to not trouble herself with social duties since they obviously bored Hem on this day. A pointed look at Hem's wringing hands and an Esgarian utterance or two about being "a cursed, royal pain" lingered in Hem's memory as she left Lida's quarters at the healers.

That made up Hemery's mind. She would not wait to see her husband until that evening, not with the heavy words from his letters echoing in her head. Her curiosity and anticipation led her to Thorin's study. Hopefully, his duties would keep him close to his quarters this afternoon.

But she found not Thorin, but Fíli in his place. As she entered, the prince looked up from where he was leaning on a table with items strewn haphazardly about. She must not have hid her disappointment well since he frowned at her.

"Uncle was called away," he responded to her unspoken question. "I don't suppose I could be of service?"

Hem forced a small smile. "No, thank you. I just . . . wished to speak to him about somethin'. That's all." She stepped closer. "Do you know when he'll return?"

"Who knows?" said Fíli, once more focused on the table in front of him, still frowning.

The table was full of what looked like worn leather satchels or backpacks, clothes and bedrolls, a few wooden boxes, and an opened silk bag filled with jewellery—thin silver chains stained dark brown from neglect, medallions with smooth but dull amber and jade, a brooch of greenish brass. Surely, this lot of junk did not belong to either the prince or the king?

"What's all this?" Hem asked.

"It was retrieved from the eastern forest," Fíli replied. "Most likely the Brages' packing as they fled Blackwater and then the orcs. What's left of it, anyway," he added. "Some was spoiled beyond recognition or salvation."

Hemery lifted one of the silver chains from the jewellery bag, watching it tangle in some leather cords and tumble out in a heap with everything else. From under the bag, another small trinket rolled out.

A ring with a smoky, white stone.

Hem froze, letting the chain and its sisters fall from her hand and back to the table in a soft jingle of delicate metal.

"Where, exactly, did you say these things were found?" she croaked.

Fíli looked up, ignorant of the weight settling on Hem's shoulders, pulling at her mind and hand to pick up the ring. *Her* ring.

"You should know," Fíli said. "Most of them were found in the vicinity of where Lady Brage's remains were . . . gathered."
Distantly, Hem drew back in her memory to that moment where she last saw Lady Brage. When the desperate woman pleaded for Hem's help, clutching her hand...

The Brage woman gotten hold of the ring. That was why Hem could not find it. That was why it now lay on the table before her, lumped together with dirt and rubbish, soiling the gem with mere association if not physical contact.

"At least, the old hag may be given a proper grave. No one deserves a fate like that, despite ones crimes and faults." Fíli sighed, his voice growing soft. "Did you see it?"

"Hmm?" Hem was pulled from her attentive stare at the ring to meet his eyes. Had she seen? "Oh, no. Well, yes, I guess you could say I did." She had buried a knife in Lady Brage's neck, but she had not stayed to watch the orcs go to work on her. Did anyone other than her guards know of it?

"Not an easy thing, I'm sure." Fíli said, gravely, turning his eyes away.

Slowly, Hem's fingers crept forward over the surface of the table until she could grasp the ring in her fist and hide it from sight.

"Do not let it dictate your mind," Fíli stated, confidently.

Ice ran through Hem's veins. Again, she was frozen in surprise and dread. Did he know? Did he mean the—?

"Violence leaves traces on our spirit," Fíli said, piercing her with an unusually somber face. "But we mustn't let it dominate our conscience, or it will torment us, day and night. You were fortunate to escape, and you should be glad to feel that fortune, not regret it or feel guilty for it."

Hemery was released from her paralysis, but she did not know what to say. She just nodded, waiting for the moment to pass.

"What will you do with all this?" she asked when she felt it safe to change the subject.

"Deranged or not, the Brages always had plans and an uncanny ability to execute those plans, much to the displeasure of Erebor. So if there is evidence of foul intent somewhere in here," he waved one hand over the table," I will find it."

He began by turning over one of the bags, making sure everything spilled out, and checking the inside before tossing it aside to go through its entrails.

"Very good," Hem concluded, tapping the table with her nails before turning to go. "I'll speak to Thorin later."

Lida could not complain. The linens on her bed were white and clean. The unyielding stone room was a cool contrast to Esgaroth's humid decay. She was given a small, private chamber in the healers' wing in Erebor. She was fed three meals a day, and a dwarf in grey robes came to redress her wounds twice a day. She did not even need to empty her own chamber pot during her recovery. She could not complain.

Not that anyone would listen if she did. No one spoke to her regarding anything other than the practical matter of her injuries. Perhaps her reputation preceded her. Perhaps they all knew that Lida would not be here if not for the charity of the queen. And it was true; she would not be in Erebor, beginning an new life, literally away from the streets of Esgaroth. But her body would also have full mobility, and her eyes would have full sight—and she would be poor as a ship rat.
Thanks to Lady Hemery's employ, Lida had collected a small purse of gold that was hers to do with as she wished. As soon as she fulfilled her promise to Lady Hemery, that she would go to school, she would use the money to buy a proper burial place in the heart of Erebor for her mother who now lay in shallow earth by the Long Lake. To think that penniless dwarves without a mountain would have to settle for the wet soil as a final resting place—it was unacceptable. The thought dug beyond discomfort, beyond worms, and beyond pale bones exhumed by weather, animals, and time. Beyond respectability, and beyond honour. No, Lida's mother would not be lying in disgrace for long. She would see to it.

Lida only hoped the queen would stand fast in her own promises, that she would settle Lida as a citizen in Erebor, that the city would be her home. Without Lady Hemery's support, it would be difficult. Ereborian dwarves might share her ancestry, but they were notoriously prejudiced against Esgaroth and all who dwelled there—men, elves, and dwarves alike. Especially if they all knew that her professional interests up till a few weeks ago had exclusively orbited liberal dexterity.

Though Lida had never really been given reason to distrust Lady Hemery, she worried now when her goal was so clearly in sight. The queen was queen, with all the duties and headaches that came with it, and Lady Hemery was already troubled enough without having to tend to Lida's wishes. From the first moment they met, Lida knew Lady Hemery was a burdened soul, her shoulders too stiff for her young age. But since she clearly was not burdened by money issues, mostly just distracted, Lida thought her an easy target. Though that impression had turned out to be false, Hemery's burdens remained. Lida could see it when she fought, when she feared, when she cried, and when she threatened. Everything was always at stake where Hemery was concerned. Everything was a fight.

It exhausted Lida as much as it fascinated her. And it worried her. Especially after the day before, when Hemery had followed her own compass into the dark woods, heedless of advice against it. But the queen was the queen, and she did as she pleased. Except—

A knock roused Lida from her solitary, circular mind. It was too early for supper, too late for examinations. Lady Hemery had already come for her daily social obligation and gone just as quickly. And healers were far too impatient to knock twice before demanding entrance.

Upon opening the door, a chill ran down her spine at the sight that greeted her.

Prince Kíli and a trail of guards stared her down. The prince appeared passive, but calculation simmered behind that dispassioned gaze.

"What do you want?" Lida asked. She was not in control of much, but she felt it important to maintain the privacy of her chambers, however limited it may be.

"Guards," Prince Kíli spoke while keeping his eyes locked with hers, "escort the thief to the lower third level. She has a very pressing engagement which she simply cannot be allowed to miss."

At supper, Dwalin came to see Hemery. She had been sitting alone in the small dining room, waiting for Hanah and Híli. It was not like them to be late, but Hem had heard no news, so she figured they were on their way. Meanwhile, Hem picked at some roasted potatoes, too restless to hunger. She wanted to see Thorin, but she knew he would be busy until late evening, as always.

"Are ye ill?" were the first words out of Dwalin's mouth when he was let in.

"No, why?" Hem bristled, unusually defensive.
"Ye haven't touched the rolls. And with fresh butter like this on the table, no less. Ye're spoiled, ye are."

He picked one from the pile of fresh bread rolls, tearing a big chunk with his teeth as he sat down in Híli's empty seat.

To be honest, she had not even noticed the basket full of bread on the table. Now when he mentioned it, she could feel the heavy scent of them. Still warm, too, she reckoned. But she was not really hungry, so she left them alone.

Dwalin kept chewing, taking more bites before even swallowing what he had in his mouth. All the while, he looked at her as powdery flower gathered in his beard.

He watched her for so long that she started to squirm. First leaning on the table with one elbow, shifting her weight to the left. Then she took her arm down, leaning back in her chair. It placed her further from the food on the table, but his look could not make her eat just for eating's sake. She was not a child, and she did not need his opinions on her appetite or lack thereof.

Eventually, Dwalin's eyes flickered down to her hands in her lap. Catching herself, she stopped twirling the white ring on her finger. Instead, she covered it with her hand, resting both in her lap. Even so, in the next instant, she tucked the hand with the ring into her pocket, keeping it completely hidden.

When she looked at him again, Dwalin's eyes were back on her face.

He tapped a fingertip on the wood of the table top. Then he cleared his throat.

"If I asked ye whether ye're . . . unhappy, ye'd tell me, would ye not?"

She frowned. "Aye. Of course."

"Is that so?" he asked once more, stroking his beard in contemplation.

"For sure," she confirmed, confused as to what he was referring. What was he looking for in her appearance? What had he heard? Something about yesterday's events, probably.

"Hm," he grunted.

"Are you alright?" she asked finally.

He snorted in amusement or incredulity. "Me? Oh, I'm as fit as a fiddle, I am. You, on the other hand, look like ye haven't slept in weeks."

"I sleep just fine," she said, the truth of a single moment. She slept fine last night, only after a long line of restless nights.

"Did ye, aye? If ye say so."

"I can't provide proof, if that's what you want," she snapped. "What are you doin' here, anyway?"

Dwalin's eyes narrowed. "Do I need a reason? How about I haven't seen ye in weeks? Ye've not trained since before ye left for Lake Town. If these changes are indicative of yer life as a married woman, I'm sure I don't like it."

"Is there anythin' you do like?" Hem sighed, thenshrugging. "So I don't see you everyday anymore—doesn't mean I need help."
"I didn't say ye needed help."

This conversation was tiresome. Maybe she did need more sleep.

"Well, good. I've just been very busy, in case you didn't notice, and I don't have time to trek down to your cottage every day like I used to."

"Ye know that's not what I mean."

"I have no idea what you mean," she said, shaking her head.

"This is not a good place for ye," Dwalin said, slowly reaching out to pluck the meat knife which she had lazily spun on its point, like a drill against the table, out of her hand. She let him take it. She had barely been aware that she was doing it.

"Whatever this new state of crisis is for ye, it needs to stop," he said calmly.

He stood up, throwing the steak knife onto the table with a clang. The noise startled her, as if it woke her from slumber, and she looked at him curiously.

"Come," he grumbled. "Ye need some air."

She hesitated, knowing she should stay. She wished to speak to Thorin about . . . something. But the child in her obeyed Dwalin, a habit too ingrained to disrupt even if she would rather stay home and rest now that she might look forward to a night of full sleep.

"Aren't dwarves generally unfavourable towards the outdoors?" she asked, even as she stood to follow.

"That very well may be, but mankind are not. Keep up."

"Are we goin' to the tarn?" Hemery asked Dwalin after they had passed his yard on their walk and still continued on, down through the woods, showing no sign of stopping.

Hem had not seen what she and her sister called Dwalin's lake in over ten years. Her last visit did not leave as warm and cozy a feeling as she would have liked in its wake.

Dwalin did not reply. What business did he mean for them to have down here? But it was not unusual for Dwalin to take her on small adventure without explanation. Though it had been a good long while since their last little trip.

"It'll be dark soon."

"Are ye afraid of the dark, ladybug?" he asked without looking back.

"No," she answered though the trees seemed to close in around her in an unpleasant way, the shadows growing and reaching for her with sinister fingers.

"Maybe ye should be," was all he said.

Hem felt her hand itch to grasp a dagger, but she refrained, refusing to give into her fears. Dwalin was not a threat, but perhaps something close by alerted her to danger nevertheless. She could not separate the instincts to trust and to defend in her mind.

As soon as they reached the clearing by the rocky shore, Hem noticed a group of people gathered
there. Hanah, Fili, Kili, and even Thorin were there, seemingly waiting for them. The pond's water was still as a mirror, reflecting the red sunset in its surface, but she did not wish to approach it to see if it in reality was as bottomless as in her childhood.

"What's happenin'" Hem asked, Dwalin or nobody in particular. All of them.

Kili raised his hands, as if in defence. "Are you expecting an ambush?" he joked, but his smirk did not match the unusual gravity of his gaze.

Confused, Hem looked around. They were all watching her, and Dwalin's eyes glanced down to her waist. Unaware, she had indeed gripped the handle of a dagger at her belt. With conscious effort, she released it and let her hand relax by her side.

"A bit startled," she explained. "That's all. I wasn't informed of a family council bein' held down here. Curious place for a gatherin'." She cut her eyes to Dwalin, suspicious. Taking in her surroundings properly, she saw none of their guards present. Even Bror and Vannur had stayed beyond the tree line, beyond her sight.

"We wanted to speak to you without interruptions or distractions," Fili said.

"With me?" Hem smiled, humourless. "What could you all want to discuss at the same time? Out here, no less."

"Come here," Dwalin said, ushering her to a stop on a flat rock at the water's edge.

The pond was just as black and deep as Hem remembered it. A surge like that of looking into an abyss tugged in her gut, making her want to step back from the edge, but she stayed.

"Now," Dwalin continued, "I want ye to remove that bloody ring and throw it in the lake."

Hem froze. "What?" A cold panic ran up her spine.

"Ye heard me," he said, pinning her with a glare. "Toss the cursed thing, or I'll do it for ye."

Hem choked out a short laugh. "You're bein' ridiculous. What is this about?"

"Ye know it's dangerous. Don't deny it." Dwalin shook his head, not easily fooled.

"It's just a ring," she said, but turned her body slightly away to shield the hand where it rested from his view. "I don't see—"

"If it's just a worldly thing," Hanah began, stepping forward, "then you can part from it, easily. If it holds no real importance to you?"

Hem looked from Dwalin to her sister and back again. "Of course, it doesn't," she said, but her voice was not as sure and strong as before. Pinpricks of cold sweat appeared at the back of her neck. "What is this nonsense you've set yourselves on? Surely, you all have more important things to tend to?"

"Nothin' more important than your sanity," Hanah said. "You know you've not been the same since you came back from Blackwater. You've been impulsive, reckless, unkind . . . even aggressive at times."

"When have I been violent with you?" Hem asked, taken aback, and frankly, affronted by the accusation.
"Not with me, but Lida tells of another part of your character, someone far different from my sister, durin' your time in Lake Town," Hanah explained carefully. "She said it was like you were hearin' voices."

That little, backstabbing slattern, Hem thought with surprising malevolence. After the graciousness Hem had shown Lida, this was the thanks? Disloyalty and disrepute. Stunned, Hem countered, "You'll believe a wretched thief over your own sister?" The words flew from her tongue before she even calculated a response.

She certainly had not heard voices, not in the way implied, like a mad woman. But neither did Hem want to admit that she had in fact seen and heard things, amazing things, things that she should not be able to have sensed, things she should not be able to have known. It was magical, but it was hers. It had shown her the future, warned her of danger, and no one would take it from her.

"Your guards tell the same tale," Kili cut in. "And you'd have my hide if I ever called her that—"

"That was before she went behind my back, spinnin' stories about me to my sister," Hem spat. "And if it looks like a goose and quacks like a goose—I'll call it a goose."

"I went to her for answers," Hanah argued. "This isn't like you. You were the first to defend Lida's honour—"

Hem flailed in frustration. "What do you care? What do they know about my character, anyway? I never spoke to Vannur before two months ago, Rain works when I sleep, and Bror never utters a word to me."

"But we do," Dwalin barked. "We know yer character. We can tell the difference."

"Can you?" Hem challenged. "Or perhaps you just can't accept it?"

Dwalin did not reply, his jaw clenching tight.

"You never wanted me to marry, you never wanted me to travel, you never wanted me to move to Erebor, you never wanted to teach me the sword," Hem listed. "I'm not your daughter. You cannot make me do anythin'."

Dwalin's features darkened, but he said nothing. Distantly, Hem knew her words were shattering her world. They were irreversible. But so was her trajectory. If they had their way, it would end her. She knew it. She felt it in her bones. No one would take it from her.

She turned to leave, but Hanah stopped her with a hand on her arm.

"Hem, you don't mean—"

Hem interrupted Hanah, shrugging off her hand. "No, you hold your tongue for once. You're worse. I'm a grown woman, but if you had your way, I'd still be sleepin' in your bed every night, like a helpless babe. You're not in charge of me anymore. Father will not whip you if you take your eyes off me for one moment. Focus your attentions on your new perfect family. They need it more than I ever did."

Hanah stood staring hard, lips trying to form coherence without sound.

As soon as Hemery thought she might escape this attack, that she finally hit hard enough for them to let her leave, so she could hide, hide away her gemstone, Thorin spoke.
"Your sister is right," he said, voice measured and calm as usual.

Hem turned to him.

He stood furthest away from her, his nephews between them as if protecting him from her. He looked at her sideways, warily, with his head turned half away as if he expected something unexpected.

"This is not you."

"I thought you liked me like this? Outspoken and truthful," Hem asked, almost teasing.

"Not like this. I, too, can tell the difference. I just did not want to see it until Fíli pointed it out to me. And even then, I would not believe it until your sister testified to its effects." He paused. "It's the ring. It's been there a while now. In your forgetfulness, in your distraction, and in your bile here today. Aye, I see it now." He looked away, frowning, as if in shame almost.

Pain stabbed a unforgiving needle into Hem's heart.

"So yesterday . . ." she began. "Was I not myself then? Was it not me in your bed? Would you have taken advantage if I was bereaved of my mind?"

"Don't—" Thorin cut himself off, as if the thought hurt him. "I thought . . . I knew it was you, but now, this is just a ghost of you."

Hem's heart turned to stone, almost like Thorin's words made her thus by uttering the accusation.

"That's convenient for you, is it not, my king? To claim me sane whenever you need me to be."

Thorin closed his eyes and turned away.

"Perhaps you were," Fíli cut in suddenly. "Yesterday, you did not have the ring. You lost it in the woods, and then today, you took it back from Thorin's study."

Hem regarded him in surprise.

"I noticed it missing after you left. No one else could have taken it," he explained calmly. "And, you see, I've seen similar afflictions before. It was not hard to piece together with the help of your sister and your guards. The ring is changing you, Hem. You need to rid yourself of it before it's too late."

Hemery did not realise she had been slowly moving away until her back hit something. A quick look told her Dwalin stood in her way. A hand gripped her wrist. Startled, she lashed out, striking Hanah who had attempted to hold her still, presumably to take the ring from Hem by force.

Someone called out. Fíli, perhaps. Hanah's eyes, large and wounded, opened in time to see Hem be overtaken and pushed to her knees by Dwalin. Even the trickle of blood from her sister's mouth could not stop Hem's hand from drawing a knife to defend herself from any and all assailants, though they in this case happened to be her family.

She felt an opening in the hold the dwarf had on her, but meaty, tough fingers closed around the blade of her knife, surprising Hem enough in their boldness for her to lose her momentum and relinquish her hold on the weapon, even while the sharp metal cut the palm of its holder until blood seeped between his fingers.

"Is it to be my lot that every student of mine would eventually take up arms against me?" Dwalin
reflected out loud. Then, he growled in Hem's ear, "Have ye made peace with your fate? Because I have. I would rather cut the hand from yer body than have ye live out yer life poisoned, as a perversion of yerself, with all limbs still intact."

Hemery hesitated, not by much, but Hanah took the opportunity to dig her thumbnail into Hem's palm, wrench her fingers open from the fist she had closed, rip the offending piece of rock from her person, and hurl it into the dark depths of the lake.

Hem cried out as if in pain, but Hanah did not flinch, her eyes hardened and resolute.

Staring out over the surface of the lake where the ring had disappeared, Hemery slumped in Dwalin's arms until he was no longer holding her down, but holding her up. He kneeled with her, keeping at least her upper body off the wet earth. He threw her knife aside. His hand, sticky with blood, came up to gather her arms to her body, keeping her together with his solid strength.

A great sorrow and despair tore at Hem's insides, and she clung to Dwalin's arms, crying out until she both mourned the loss of something valuable to her as well as the loss of reason. She screamed in agony until her lungs could not produce more sound, and then she took a new rasping breath and screamed again. She clutched at Dwalin until she thought she might break his bones, but he held her fast.

She could not make sense of what had just happened. What had she said, and why? Why did she feel as though she had cut her own flesh from stomach to chin? Then it came over her like a wave, the realisation of what she had done, what she had said to the people she loved.

"No, no, no, no, no," she could only whisper over and over. "Hanah? Hanah, please . . ." She could hardly see for crying, hoping her sister was still there, near her. But Hanah did not come.

Hem struggled to look up, blurry vision seeking Hanah. Her sister stood an arm length away with no indication to move closer or farther away. With a flick of her foot, she kicked away the unsheathed knife lying on the ground, away from herself, but more importantly, away from Hem.

Hanah was afraid of her. Did not trust that Hem would not draw more blades. And Hem could not fault her reasoning.

Nausea overcame Hemery, and she hunched over and emptied her stomach of water and bile onto the rocks. She coughed and spat a long moment before being able to form words again.

"Forgive me," Hem pleaded with the stone, hiccuping between sobs. "Please."

She turned her head to the side, pressing her cheek to Dwalin's shoulder.

"Forgive me," she whispered, hoarse and tired.

"There, now," Dwalin said, rough but without spite, as he rubbed her wrists with his thumbs where he still held her. "That's it. It's gone now. It'll all be over soon."

He did not accept her apologies, nor did Hem think she would believe him if he did. Warm tears continued to run down her cheeks. Her brow ached from crying, and her legs hurt from kneeling, but nothing stopped the sobs that were wrenched out of her. Guilt and pain sat in her gut like red-hot coals.

After an eternity, she felt a touch on her face. Hanah knelt before her, wiping Hem's teary cheeks and wet mouth with a handkerchief. Hem's head pounded, but her sobs had quietened enough for Hanah and Dwalin to rise her to her feet.
"Time to go," Hanah decided.

With Dwalin and Hanah's help, Hem managed to slowly make her way uphill on unsteady legs. Upon passing the others, she noticed that Kili and Fili each had a hand on the king's shoulders, as if they had been holding him back.

"Hem?" Thorin questioned, trying to get her attention.

She turned her face away from him. She felt too much shame to look him in the eye. She wanted to forbid him to look at her at all, but she could not even speak to him.

He did not try again.
Hemery's head ached as she sat on the edge of Dwalin's bed. Her posture was heavy like a sleepwalker, her face downturned from shame as well as exhaustion.

"Try to drink somethin'," Dwalin rumbled softly at her.

A cup of water appeared next to her face. Gentle but persistent fingers lifted her chin and guided the cup to her lips.

Hanah.

Hem managed a few sips. The water was cool against dry, bitten lips.

Then hands took charge of her limbs, stripping her of harnesses and hidden daggers. She did not care. Hem knew she was safe here with Dwalin and her sister.

"Is that all of them?" Hanah asked in hushed tones.

Hem felt two more leather sheaths removed from her boots and heard them flung onto the floor with dull thuds.

"That's all of 'em," Dwalin settled.

Hanah unlaced and pulled off Hem's boots as well.

"Get some rest," Dwalin commanded before leaving them alone, pulling the door to the kitchen closed.

Hanah helped her out of her coat and tunic, letting Hem keep her shift on as she was tucked in under the blankets. But Hanah did not leave like Hem expected her to. Instead, she undressed in silence and joined Hem in the bed, settling in for the night together like they did when they were younger. Hanah surprised her again by enclosing Hem in an embrace, wrapping one arm over her torso tightly, as if keeping Hem in her own skin.

"I'm sorry," Hem could not stop herself from repeating.

"Shh," Hanah whispered. "Rest now."

"Are you not afraid of me?" Hem's voiced cracked in the dark, and tears which she thought long cried out once more gathered in her eyes.
Hanah sighed. "No. I'm afraid of what it did to you. What might become of you."

Hemery did not know what she would become now. She only felt hollow in her chest were fear of the unknown still lingered. Fear of what she might do, and what she had already done.

"Forgive me," slipped out of her mouth again, as she was desperate for at least Hanah to know that none of what she had said or done was with the intent to harm.

"There's nothin' to forgive," Hanah said sterner. "If you would ever hurt me—"

"I did hurt you."

Hanah squeezed her chest tighter with her arm for a moment. "If you ever hurt me, I want you to know that I will always forgive you. We are one, you and I. No matter how difficult, you always followed me. I have always taken care of you. And no matter how far you travel, you come back to me. I know you will."

Hem gripped Hanah's wrist and squeezed back. After a long moment of nothing but Hem's wet breaths heard through the stillness, Hanah softly began to sing.

Day moves to its end
Prepate to part ways, my friend
Life lingers, sleeping in your hand
A bird called Grief nests on your land
Life will flee, but Death will stay
You must begin the journey, alone, to Far Away

In the light of a smoky fire in Dwalin's yard, the king uttered careful words to the dwarf who was once his most trusted hand.

"She is well, I assume," Thorin said, though nothing in his countenance showed any assurance of the fact.

Dwalin looked away from the improvised hearth—which he had lit in order for the king, Kíli, Raín, and whatever guards that accompanied them to stay dry and warm during their vigil—and met Thorin's eye.

He said nothing, refusing to answer a question that was not a question.

"Otherwise, you would not let her be, correct?" Thorin challenged. "If she needs a healer, or if—?"

"She needs rest. Peace and quiet," Dwalin interrupted with a pointed look at the king. "She'll recover best if left alone. Hanah will make sure of it."

"You seem very confident," Thorin said, frowning doubtfully.

"Given time, she'll awaken from the infernal influence like a drunk sleeps of his drink. I've seen it before." Another meaningful glance cast toward Thorin.

The king sighed heavily, settling down by the fire.
Kíli appeared then, sitting down next to his uncle. He jostled Thorin with his knee as he sat, gingerly holding a cup of something that was most likely pilfered from Dwalin's pantry. No worries visible on his smooth brow or in his carefree smile.

"This is just like old times, eh, Uncle?" Kíli elbowed Thorin in his side. "Dwalin, bring out your fiddle. Let's make a night of it."

Or perhaps Kíli just refused to let insignificant things like mystical rings and violence to sully his outlook.

"And fetch some of your famous juniper-smoked sausage while you're at it," Kíli called after Dwalin.

"Ye can smoke yer own sausage if ye don't quit yer hollerin'," Dwalin replied caustically over his shoulder, much to Kíli's childish amusement.

Whichever the case, Thorin thought, it was going to be a long night.

Hemery slept fitfully, awakened sometimes by nightmares, sometimes by dreams fading with the first blink of her eye. But she slept. And she slept for a long time.

Thorin and Dwalin stayed by the fire in the yard all night, camping out on blankets under the stars. Dwalin's cottage stood empty, had been ever since Hanah and Hemery moved out, but neither dwarf seemed willing to leave the yard, as if unwilling to distance themselves too much from Dwalin's house.

In the morning, Thorin knocked on the door.

"Your Highness," Hanah greeted politely.

"Hanah," he sighed, closing his eyes briefly and raising a hand as if to plead with her, or perhaps physically stop her from using whatever formalities she deemed necessary when the king of Erebor stood outside a shack on a hill to inquire after his wife's health. "Can I see her?" he asked, glancing past Hanah into the dark smithy.

"She's sleepin','" Hanah replied.

Thorin lingered a moment, seemingly wanting to ask something else, demand answers that could not be given by a sleeping woman. Hanah would never stir her sister from sleep just to accommodate the king, and they both knew it. Realising the futility of his wishes, he nodded in resignation. He had to wait.

"Send word as soon as she wakes," he said, turning to leave, Hanah assumed, for Erebor.

When Hemery woke, Hanah fed her bread and sweet tea. Then she slept more. Hanah sent no word to Erebor, knowing Hem would be disturbed as soon as she did.

And so Hanah let her rest, sitting in the smithy, mending Dwalin's leather apron to pass the time. She and Dwalin ate meat stew and sat on the front steps in the afternoon, enjoying what they could of the summer breeze while knowing Hemery lay inside, her fate still uncertain. They talked some and strolled between Dwalin's house and the woods, as much as a dwarf is able to stroll leisurely, Hanah picking flowers and early berries in the wild grass.
"How did you know?" Hanah asked. "That there was somethin' wrong?"

Dwalin shrugged. "Her temper. Shorter than usual. Fidgetin' like a bird flitterin' about. And when you came to me yesterday, it all made sense. Though nothin' of this really makes any kind of sense."

Hanah looked down at her free hand. It was stained by sap and berries, and she wiped it off on her skirt.

"I wasn't sure, though, until the very end," he went on. "Somethin' about the eyes. I knew that look. Madness, cornered and dangerous. I've been on the receivin' end of that before. Almost beastlike. Soulless."

Hanah nodded in understanding. "I try to tell myself that it wasn't her, not really, but the things she said . . ."

"No lies would hurt if they didn't contain some truth," Dwalin said.

Their eyes met in the shade at the edge of a sunlit grove. Hanah smiled despite the grief. Dwalin did not smile, could not, but it was alright.

"What if she doesn't come back . . .?" Hanah asked. "If she doesn't go back to the way she were?"

"Then she won't," Dwalin stated, kicking at an old stump until it splintered. "And we'll deal with it. But we don't know that she won't, so she might."

They stood silent a moment. Hanah wavered between hope and impatience, fear and resignation.

"Would you really have cut off her hand?" she asked.

He shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe. I find it a rare occasion when I actually need to follow through on a threat. Most of the time, I just do things. And the rest kinda sorts itself out."

Hanah snorted in something like amusement as they turned to slowly walk back to the yard.

"You don't mind us occupyin' your house?" she asked.

"Well, it is my house," he replied, both agreeing and not agreeing at the same time. "It's only a matter of time before Thorin nags her out of her shell and into the mountain again. She'll do it to shut him up if nothin' else."

"Do you think he'll take her back, just like that?" Hanah held fast to her promise, that she would always forgive Hemery any offense, but could the same be said of the king?

"He has no breath to spend on games of who blames whom. Nay, he's more likely to understand her situation than any of us."

Hanah had no choice but to believe him.

Thorin came back in the evening. He was told by Hanah that Hemery was still resting and that he would be told when she was fit for visitors. Hanah could tell he was not happy—was he ever?—but he left them in peace.

Resting, perhaps, but Hem was not asleep. She hardly moved from Dwalin's bed, though, only stirring to eat, but mostly staring at the wall, refusing to speak to even Hanah. Sometimes she wept,
Hanah holding her close and singing her to stillness, comforting her like the child Hem had adamantly stated she was not. Hemery feared the shame, grief, and poisonous regret would never fade.

And she slept.

Kíli stopped by. He ate Dwalin's biscuits and drank tea with Hanah in Dwalin's kitchen. Dwalin himself sat on the front steps with the door open, seemingly ignoring the visitor while still within hearing range, idly smoking his pipe. The sweet smoke drifted softly through the house, traces of it reaching Hemery where she lay on Dwalin's bed under a blanket, wide awake and listening to the conversation in the other room through a crack in the door.

"You missed a spectacle today," Kíli said loudly to Hanah, but clearly it was for the benefit of all in proximity. "The first day of the trial, and I could hardly sit through the morning's proceedings. Twenty seven accused, and that's just the first batch. The magistrates cannot see above the stacks of parchment in front of them. The town hall is so packed with people that the doors do not even close." He casually sipped at his tea. "A shame Hem isn't there to see her work bear fruit."

She should be there, Hem thought. The trial had slipped her mind, and she grew curious now as to its progress. But she could barely imagine facing Kíli and Dwalin, much less the rest of the world. And least of all Thorin.

He would be busy too, observing everything, adding his opinions at every turn, unable to let the magistrates handle it. She smiled softly at the thought. Then she felt shame sour her stomach. He should focus on his work, not waste his precious time coming to Dwalin's house several times a day just to ask about her wellbeing. He knew she was well. Hanah had informed him of this. But still he came.

Hem pulled the blanket over her head.

"Perhaps . . ." Kíli went on after a moment, unusually somber. "Perhaps it would be best if Hem returned home. To conclude her convalescence in the royal chambers."

Hanah pinned him with a sharp look. "She's perfectly comfortable here."

"I know that," Kíli replied in a reedy tone, one Hem remembered was usually accompanied by an innocent shrug. "It's just . . . The queen cannot stay away from her marriage bed for long without raising suspicion—"

"Suspicion of what?" Hanah asked, incredulous. She knew what the suspicion would be of, naturally. She just wanted to see if the issue was so severe he dared to speak the words.

"—Inciting rumours that we don't need. Especially so soon after the wedding," he went on.

"We?"

"Aye, we are all affected. And I'm sure Dwalin is keen to have his space to himself once more."

"Nope," came Dwalin's quick and easy response from just outside the door. "I have no troubles. Don't stir any on my behalf."

"Very well. But we must resolve this sooner rather than later. I don't want to sweat under the heat of Uncle's temper any longer than I must. And Fíli is increasingly cranky. The family resemblance is uncanny in this particular case. Not to mention, Híli needs her mother."
"I saw her yesterday. She knows I'm takin' care of her aunt," Hanah defended.

"What if you could take care of her inside Erebor?" Kíli suggested lightly.

"Kíli—" Hanah sighed.

"Just think about it," he said, the reedy, innocent note back in his voice. He drank the last of his tea in silence.

On the third morning, Thorin paced up and Dwalin's yard for an hour before going back to Erebor. Quieter and moodier than ever. He did not ask permission to see Hemery, nor did Hanah offer.

Through the window, she witnessed his departure.

"Is he gone?" Hem asked.

Hanah flinched, startled, and turned. Hem stood in the doorway to the bedroom with a blanket around her, her hair loose and unwashed over her shoulders.

"Aye," Hanah replied. "He's gone. But he'll be back."

"He makes me nervous, stayin' here when I know he can't afford to."

"I'm sure you make him nervous, as well."

Hem looked down and returned to bed, but not before Hanah could see her frown.

"You'll dress and eat breakfast at the table with me today," Hanah said before Hem could close the door.

There was no reply, but Hanah could hear her move around in there. As Hanah set out bread, cheese, and tea, Hem appeared and sat down at the kitchen table.

"You dawdle to have me wait on you," Hanah challenged, calling her sister out. Hem glanced sheepishly up at her. "I will only allow it this once."

Hem smirked a bit. "You have people waitin' on you hand and foot at home."

"Aye, and so do you. But they get paid for their trouble."

"You don't have to stay here, you know," Hem said, looking down into her cup, serious now.

"I'm not leavin' until you tell me to," Hanah simply said.

Their eyes met over the table, and Hem managed a small smile which Hanah answered.

"Eat," Hanah ordered. "Then you can help me with Dwalin's gloves."

Híli came too, herded by Fíli and Sethie. Sethie's countenance was hard set. Fíli was tired, or perhaps just wary.

Their voices were muted through the window panes, but Hemery could see them outside in the sunshine, speaking with Hanah and Dwalin, while she stayed watching in the shadows of the smithy.
Hanah embraced Híli and spoke close to her ear, but the child would not be held back. First chance she got, Híli sprinted to the door, throwing it open and blinding Hem with the sudden burst of light.

Instinctively, she shielded her eyes from the first rays, as if they might harm her. She backed away, shrinking from the visitor.

Híli paused in the middle of the floor. Hanah had hurried after her but stopped on the threshold, determined not to show any fear of Hemery or her actions. What importance would her promise hold if she could not trust Hem to be in the same room as Híli? Hanah would trust Hem with her life, yes, but what of her daughter's?

Hanah stilled, tightening her hand into a fist next to her heart, and watched.

"Irak'amad?" Híli greeted timidly.

It was strange for Hem to see her so careful.

"What are you doin' here, pet?" Hem asked with a forced lightness. "Your father couldn't have been happy about lettin' you down here."

"Amad says you're sick," Híli said, looking Hem up and down hesitantly, as if unsure of what to think.

Hem felt her fingers twitch to grasp a thing that was not there.

"Aye, pet," she replied. "I have been. Don't rightly know just what I am at the moment."

"You don't look sick. Are you hurt?" Híli took a step forward.

Hem backed up farther. Híli stopped in surprise. Then confusion overtook her small, round face.

Hem did not want to injure anyone like she had attempted to do with Dwalin and Hanah, and she could not trust herself. Not with Híli. Anyone but the child.

"No, nothin' hurts," she said. Nothing on the outside.

"When will you come home? You were going to help me read about subterranean architecture for class. You know I don't read well." The pout Híli produced was half theatre, half truth.

Hem huffed a laugh that died quickly. "You read fine, lass. You just want me there to praise you when you finish. And engineering logic is boring. I don't blame you."

Híli was silent a long moment. Then she looked down at floor.

"You're going away for a long time again, aren't you?"

A knot formed in Hem's throat, and she could not stop her eyes from watering.

She honestly could not say. What could she say that was not a lie? She did not know. Hem really did not know.

"I—" Hem's voice broke. But she did not have time to utter anymore before Híli crossed the distance in two bounds and threw herself into Hemery's arms.

"Please, don't go away again," Híli sobbed. "Please."
Hem squeezed her eyes shut against the tears, the lump in her throat expanding. But feeling the forceful arms of the headstrong lass around her waist, she was helpless to resist.

She could never hurt Híli. Not even if she was drunk and bewitched. Hem felt it in her marrow. How could she even have considered such a thing? Not Híli. Anyone but the child.

So she held on tightly and said, "I'm not goin' anywhere. I promise." And knew she meant it.

That night, Hemery had just finished washing, using a small basin in the kitchen, when there was a loud knock on the door.

Hemery looked at Hanah who was sitting at the table. Their eyes met. Hemery frowned, and Hanah's eyebrows rose in surprise.

They had of course expected Thorin to call on Hem again this evening but had given up on the idea due to the late hour. It was well after night fall by now. And the force behind those bangs—

"Hemery!" a thunderous voice reached them through the door. "Open this door."

The king had come to demand her presence, after all.

Hem's hands turned cold, and she clutched her used towel tightly. On unfeeling feet, she followed Hanah to the doorway between the kitchen and the smithy, but stopped there, watching as Hanah approached the door and the irate dwarf on the other side.

"I want to see her," Thorin said as soon as Hanah opened the door. There were no pleasantries or formalities here.

Hanah regarded him, saying nothing, before she turned to Hem, questioning without words.

Hem could not hide forever. Whatever Thorin thought of her actions and words, whatever judgement he had come to bestow, it was best to hear it now and be done. Her fingertips prickled and her stomach churned, but she nodded to her sister.

Hanah moved aside, opening the door wider, eyes still on Thorin.

His eyes were dark when they found Hemery. She stayed in the doorway, leaning on the frame, hiding a little behind it perhaps. She had at least had time to dress before he was let in, but her hair was still wet, hanging loose at her back.

Slowly but purposefully, Thorin took a step inside, and when he spoke, his tone was calm and not directed at her.

"Will you give us the room, please," he glanced at Hanah before focusing on Hem again.

Hanah ignored him in favour of awaiting direction from Hem. Again, Hem nodded, turning her eyes on the floor after seeing Hanah leave the house.

"Dwalin and I will be just outside," Hanah said before closing the door behind her, either to assure him or to caution Thorin. Hem wagered both options were equally true.

He said nothing for a moment, stretching Hem's nerves into fear. She did not think she would accidentally harm him. She was unlikely to succeed even if she tried; Thorin was as good a fighter as Dwalin. And she had felt safe in Híli's company, which was a great initial test she was immensely happy to have passed, but Híli had not been there on the riverbank receiving the sharp
end of Hemery's tongue. So even though she might not fear for the safety of those around her, Hem feared his opinion and his conclusion, whatever they might be.

"Will you come home tonight?" he asked at last, his gruff voice cutting the silence.

She said nothing. She did not know what to say. She did not want to return to Erebor to just pack up her things and be removed from the royal chambers, just to be reprimanded. She would rather have it done here where she could just shut the door on him if it became to much.

She did not meet his eyes.

"You will grant me the respect of an answer," he said. "I am owed that much."

To avoid his gaze, she looked at his hands which were closed into fists at his sides.

"I don't know that I have the strength just yet," she confessed.

"The strength for what?" he challenged.

"To come back." To Erebor. To him. To the way things used to be but can never be again. "To . . . life."

Thorin sighed. "But I need you to."

His frustration seeped out into his limbs as he began to move, pace, back and forth in the room.

"I cannot stand to sleep on the wet ground when I know our feather bed is a stone's throw away, when I know I could be enjoying your warmth next to me. The mountain is empty, the halls all empty like my hand whenever I reach out and you're not there. I cannot stand to not know your mind, that you're out here, gone once again, and once again unknown to me, like a stranger. But you're not a stranger, and I will not let this divide deepen for one more day. You are my wife. And why—for the love of Mahal—why will you not come home with me?"

Hem stared at him in shock. She had expected yelling, sure, but not of this sort.

"You will answer me." He was determined, but his short breath suggested he was anticipating more fighting to come.

After a long, silent moment, she found her words. "You really want me back? You want me? Still?"

He frowned, confused suddenly. "Why would I not?"

"Because you can't know for sure I'm actually me." Her fingers twitched again, but this time, Thorin was there to clasp them in his own, stopping her nervous fidgeting.

"Are you?" he asked, simply. Naively, perhaps.

She looked at their hands. "I think so."

"Then I believe you." As sure and steadfast as ever.

Hem met his open gaze, still disbelieving. "But how can you know?" She could not even know herself.

He kissed her. His lips were softer than usual, but his grip was firm, his intent familiar.
"I believe you," he said, his breath hot and earnest on her cheek.

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