Looking Back, Moving Forward

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Summary

Baggins are respectable folk, even Marie is considered so. But such things are soon thrown out the door when a wizard arrives on her doorstep and 13 dwarves raid her pantry. Childhood dreams that turned to bittersweet memories can be healed, but what has a king got to do with it?

Notes

Hello, this is a story from my old account of FF.N. Wanted to bring it over for more to see. I finished this about four years ago so bare with me for the iffy writing.

See the end of the work for more notes.
It began with a Hobbit.

'It began with a Hobbit. Not a nasty dirty wet hole full of worms and oozing smells, this was a hobbit hole, which means good food, a warm hearth, and all the comforts of home.'

The pages of the book closed, cutting off the rest. "What have I told you about reading over one's shoulder Frodo?" Marie Baggins chastised her young nephew, "It is both frightfully rude and very distracting."

"I was only ..."

"When I am finished, you may read it. But until then you and the rest of the world will have to wait."

The young hobbit smiled and patted his aunt's shoulder. He placed the handful of letters on top of the old writing desk and out of the corner of his sharp eyes, he spotted a drawing sitting on top of a pile of books. The parchment was old and rough to the touch, but the image itself remained in good condition, as if it had been freshly drawn. It was a portrait of a she hobbit, with a rounded face with long curls falling around it, a handsome nose and bright eyes that held an enormous amount of secrets behind them.

If Frodo didn't know any better he could have sworn that he was staring at the younger face of his aunt.

"Sticky beak, that's private." Marie snatched away the drawing and hid it within the black pages of her book. "Now what have you brought me?"

"Responses to the party invitations."

"My word, it's not today is it? I've lost track of time again." But Frodo was barely listening, and was loitering through the dwarven artifacts ... again. "They all said that they're coming, except for the Sackville-Baggins. They're demanding that you answer them in person."

"I'd be perfectly content for them not to come. Saves me from a headache then." Marie placed her quill back into the ink pot and wiped her hands on her burgundy skirt, "Frodo, please put that down before you cut yourself."

Frodo just scoffed, "The blade is as dull as a spoon."

Marie stood up straight and placed her hands on her hips, "I've seen orcs being killed with a spoon Frodo Baggins, now what makes you think you'd be any safer."

He promptly placed the strange weapon back into the large foot locker.

"You know they won't be happy." He went on to say, to which Marie pulled an expression as if to say 'You think I care?' as she passed him. Though her face was careworn and lined, the old hobbit still held that fiery spark of youth and humor. You would not think her to be one hundred and eleven.

"They seem to think you tunnels overflowing with gold."

"It was only one smelly chest, and only half of it was gold." She began stashing all the precious goods into drawers and cupboards, "Sixty years and I still can't get the smell of troll out of it."
Perhaps I should give it to her as a present."

"Who? And what are you doing?" Frodo asked as he watched her work.

"Secondly, taking precautions. Firstly, Lobelia Sackville-Baggins that's who. Once tried to make off with all my best clothes she did, and my silverware." Marie closed the last of the drawers, "Always keep a weather eye on her Frodo."

"I always do."

"Good lad." Marie smiled. Frodo may have had the bearing of his father, but his spirit was indeed very much kindred to her own. Itching for adventure, but still very comfortable with life in the Shire ... well, Frodo was comfortable.

Recently she had felt quite ... confined, restless and quite frankly bored with life as it was.

"Oh before I forget," She rushed into the living room and took out a large piece of parchment ah began writing, "I need you to put this on the gate for me."

"Aunt Marie?" She head Frodo say from behind her, "People are beginning to talk."

"My dear Frodo, that's all people round here do."

"They think you're becoming odd and ... unsociable." Marie could feel Frodo's insecurity about the topic. "They've been saying that for decades now. Once a spinster, always a spinster, no matter how wealthy." She brushed off the issue and handed the sign to Frodo.

Frodo glanced from the sign to his aunt, then shook his head in defeat. This made Marie chuckle heartily, and she thanked all the stars in the heavens that she still retained her wits about her. She sighed and glanced out the window fondly.

'S blunt the knives, bend the forks. Smash the bottles and burn the corks. Chip the glasses and crack the plates, that's Marie Baggins hates.'

She could still hear the blasted song ringing through Bag End.

~*~

The two Baggins worked under the blue skies. Frodo started to hammer in the nails for the sign while Marie tended to her garden, a small pipe sticking out from her mouth. Everyone could agree that, even though Marie Baggins was odd, she had one of the finest gardens in Hobbiton. The green door of Bag End shone with many different colours as they stretched across the hillside, every bloom and every patch were pristine. Even as the years came and went and the season ravaged and feed the land, Marie could maintain its beauty.

"Marie, why did you never marry?" Frodo asked, holding the nails in his mouth as he worked. Had he been looking at her, he would have seen his aunt faltered slightly. The masses of grey curls that covered her face would have hidden the glimmer of sadness from any prying eyes.

"As I have said before, I have my reasons." She answered curtly, and she began to fiddle with the silver ring she always wore on her right index finger, dragging her nail along the single rune carved into it.

"But surely you had your eye on someone at some point?"
"A woman never reveals the secrets of the heart Frodo. Learn that and you might get a wife."

"Shame really. You looked like quiet a beauty back in the day."

"And what's to say I'm not still that beauty today?" She dramatically waved her pipe above her head. "Don't you find my wrinkles alluring? Does the salt and pepper shade of my hair not shine in the sun? Rest assured, I can even sway elves."

Frodo was reduced to a fit of giggles and struggled to finish his job without crushing his fingers. Marie's job was done, for he ceased to ask about it.

As she plucked some fresh daisy for the kitchen, Frodo announced his intention of heading off to Eastfarthing wood. "I'm off to surprise Gandalf."

"Well go on then, you don't want to be late." Marie watched the young hobbit take off down the path with a new book in hand. Once he was out of sight, her face softened and she was filled with a sense of melancholy. She placed the small bouquet in her gardening basket along with her tools, and took one last puff of the long bottom leaf.

She cut a single rose from the rose bush and proceeded to venture up the side of Bag End to the large tree that stood tall above her home. There she found the small moss covered stone plaque nestled at its base, covered in dwarf runes. Only she knew what was written, and was happy to keep it that way.

"Another year." She said softly, hearing the age in her voice, "It's strange that they should fly by so quickly now, when they went so painfully slow to begin with."

She dusted the dirt away and placed the rose on the plaque. "Perhaps it means that my days are finally drawing near, I can certainly feel it in my bones nowadays."

Marie turned her eyes east, as if searching for something. "I'd like one more adventure, before I join you."

A thrush entered her sight, darting and weaving across the sky.

"I'll take that as a sign I suppose."
A Party of Thirteen

It had all begun in Marie’s garden sixty years ago. Back then she was much younger but a tad pessimistic for a hobbit and very reserved. Her hair was a light chestnut brown mess she could barely keep under control, her youthful beauty had started to harden with the appearance of frown lines in between her eyebrows. She lived on her own and spent her days much the same as any Baggins would. She shopped in the local market, attendant the necessary gatherings, politely talked when spoken to. She was entirely respectable, despite also being a Took.

She had been weeding along the gate when a shadow fell overhead. She looked up from under her straw hat expecting to see a cloud obscuring the sun, and instead saw an old wizard standing in the middle of the path. She guessed he was a wizard, for who else would wear such a funny hat and carry a wooden staff.

She was surprised to say the least, and even more surprised when it appeared he was waiting for her to speak. "Um ... Good morning."

"What do you mean? Do you wish me a good morning or mean that it is a good morning whether I want it to be or not or that you feel good this morning or that it is a morning to be good on?" Said the wizard.

Marie was so befuddled, she had forgotten that her mouth was hanging open. "I guess ... all of them at once.

The wizard continued to just stare at her, calculating from under that bushy beard.

"May I help you with something?" Marie returned her attention to her garden, not liking this amount of attention at all.

"That remains to be seen. I'm looking for someone to share in an adventure."

Maire's head snapped up and she stared at the wizard. Adventure? Her? Such a thing hadn't crossed her mind in years. "Well, I can't imagine anyone this far west of Bree would have much interest in such things." She pulled out the last of the weeds and started to pack up her tools. "You're better off back that way than here." She picked up her basket and quickly nodded her head, "Good morning," She said again, ducking her face and made her way to the door. The wizard sighed and shook his head.

"To think that should have lived to be 'Good morning'd by Belladonna Took's daughter like I was selling buttons at the door."

Marie stopped dead in her tracks.

"You've changed, and not for the better I'm afraid Mariellena Baggins."

She turned and looked at him again. "How do you ...? Do we know each other?"

"Well you do know my name, although you don't remember that I belong to it. I'm Gandalf, and Gandalf means ... me." He opened up his arms as though to give the hobbit a better look at him. After a moment of searching, she finally recalled him.

"Midsummer's Eve." She said, pointing at him, "Old Took used to have fireworks made by Gandalf the Wandering Wizard. They were absolutely amazing, best part of the evening besides watching
Old Took get drunk.” In that moment, Marie's face brightened slightly as she remembered such times, and Gandalf hopes were lifted. But the light faded, and her smile dropped into a sensible line.

He sighed and appraised the matter at hand. "It's seems the spark has dwindled somewhat. Very well then, it's decided then."

Marie glanced from side to side, "What's decided?"

"It'll be very good for you, and most amusing for me. I shall inform the others." Gandalf nodded and gathered up his grey cloak.

"Wait, wait, wait, no." Marie was all flustered and not quite sure what was going on. "No. I do not want any adventures thank you. Not now, not ever." She said, cheeks flushed crimson. Pulling her hat further over her face, she nodded one last time and huffed "Good morning," before disappearing into Bag End, locking the door behind her.

Gandalf cocked his head at her behavior. This was certainly not the same little girl from all those years ago so full of life and eagerness. He made his way to the door and carved the mark into the wood.

He was certain that this was indeed what Marie Baggins needed.

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The rest of Marie's day went without any other strange encounters or happenings, in fact apart from that morning it would have just been another day.

'Perhaps I just imagined it all.' She thought to herself as she cooked her dinner, a nice fresh fish with some new herbs to try. By why would she imagine Gandalf? She had not thought about him since she was a child. Nor had she thought about adventures. Hey brought to many memories. She decided to just forget about it and move on. But just as she finished cooking, the door bell rang.

"Who on earth?"

She wrapped her cardigan about herself and headed to the door. On the other side however stood a very large and very dangerous looking dwarf. For a moment Maire was filled with the sense that she was about to be robbed, but the dwarf bowed to her, "Dwalin, at your service."

"Ugh ... Marie Baggins at ... yours." She said, awkwardly bowing and curtsying at the same time. The large dwarf entered before she could say another to words. "Is it down her lassie?"

"I'm sorry what ...?"

"Supper."

Despite how utterly confused she was, Marie forfeited her own meal to please the dwarf. She watched helplessly as he devoured the fish. He looked like he could snap her in two so she decided to humor him for as long as she could.

Then the bell rang again.

"That'll be the door." Dwalin said with his mouth full.

"Yes I know, thank you."
It was another dwarf. Shorter and much older though, he did not give off the impression that he would harm her. "Balin, at your service." He bowed. Marie relaxed a little, "Good evening."

"Yes it is, but I think it my rain later. I hope I'm not too late." Balin shook her hand firmly. "Late?"

"Ah, haha, evening Brother." Balin turned his attention to Dwalin, who was trying to steal cookies out of a jar.

'These two are brothers?' Marie thought as she closed the door. They were laughing and looked like they were about to embrace one another, but proceeded to head but each other, startling the poor hobbit.

"Now umm ... excuse me but I'm not quite sure ..."

The two dwarves ignored her and headed off to the pantry. Marie shook her head in disbelief, "What am I invisible?"

The door bell rang again.

"Oh for goodness sake." Marie threw open the door and saw, to her dismay, more dwarves. "Fili," "And Kili, at your service." They bowed together and grinned at her. They were young and very peppy from the looks of things.

"You must be Miss Boggins."

"Sorry, wrong house." Marie tried to close the door, but couldn't with the pair of them in the doorway. "What? Has it been cancelled?"

"No one told us."

'What the hell is going on!?' Marie's patience was growing short, "Nothing's been cancelled, I ..." The one named Kili pushed though into the hallway and started to remove his weapons. "That's a relief."

"Careful with these love. I just had them sharpened." The other one, Fili, handed an assortment of knives to Marie. "Then why are you giving them to me? Hey, that's my mother's glory box!" She shouted ad Fili who was wiping his dirty shoes on it. She struggled under the weight of so many weapons as the two young dwarves were taken away by Dwalin.

"Come and give us a hand lads."

The four of them had converged in the dining room and had begun to move the chairs and cabinets around. "Let's get this into the hallway otherwise we'll never get everyone in."

"Wait, how many more of you are there?"

Ring Ring.

"Go away!" Marie shouted and dumped the weapons onto a footlocker on her way to the door. "Benjamin Brandybuck, if this is your idea of a joke, I will personally beat you over the head with a frying pan!"

She opened the door and eight dwarves literally fell at her feet. Standing behind them was none other than Gandalf, with a cheery smile on his face.

"Good evening Maire." He said.
"Gandalf." Marie shook her head.

The dwarves stood up and eventually introduced themselves one by one. Maire's head however
could not process what was happening. Soon her entire pantry was empty and lay all over the
dining room table, her father's best ale had been opened, every piece of silverware and every plate
had been used for this sudden feast. While the thirteen "guests" ate and made merriment, Marie
was on the verge of a nervous breakdown. She stared despondent at the bare shelves of the pantry
and the mud covering her family's good rugs, barely containing herself.

'It's alright Marie, just breath. Breathing is the key.' She thought, taking each breath very
carefully. The belching contest did not help at all. "That is not a cloth, give it here." Marie snatched
back the dolly from Dori. Or was it Nori? Some of the dwarves had spread out into the kitchen and
were causing more mess.

"Ya right there lass. Your head looks like an apple." Bofur said, taking another sip of ale. "I am
 NOT alright." She growled.

"Marie dear, what's the matter" Gandalf ducked under the doorway and joined them.

"Gandalf, a word please?" Marie walked with speed into the vacant hallway with the wizard
trailing behind, "Maybe you can explain why my home is now a mad house?"

"Good gracious. You may be over reaction just a little."

"You would be too if twelve strangers came into your home, stole all the food and used your
dollies as napkins." Marie rubbed her face roughly, "I just want to know what is going on."

"'scuse me?" Ori appeared out of the dinning, holding out an empty plate, "I hate to interrupt, but
what should I do with my plate?"

Marie calmed a little, At least this one had some manners. "Just pop into the kitchen please."

"I'll take it Ori." Fili snatched up the plate the threw it sharply at Kili, how tossed it into the
kitchen. Marie's temperature went up again. "Don't. That pottery is over a ..." She ducked as more
plates and bowels came flying out of the dining room, " ... a hundred years old!"

Bofur, Gloin, Nori and Dori started mucking around with the silverware, large grins on all their
faces. "Don't do that. You'll blunt them."

"Ya hear that lads? She says we'll blunt the knives." Bofur teased.

"Blunt the knives and bend the forks!" Kili started to sing, and his brother joined him, knocking
bowels with his elbows. "Smash the bottles and burn the corks!"

"Chip the glasses and crack the plates!
That's what Marie Baggins hates!"
"Cut the cloth and tread the fat!
Leave the bones on the bedroom mat!
Pour the milk on the pantry floor!
Splash the wine on every door!"

All twelve dwarves joined in with the song and tossed the plates all around the room. Marie tried to
catch some, but Kili beat her to it every time. Amazingly as he did, he grabbed Marie's hand and
twirled her about, like it was nothing more than a dance.
“Dump the crocks in a boiling bowl,
Pound them up with a thumping pole,
And when you've finished, if any are whole,
Send them down the hall to roll!”

The dwarves were having a grand old laugh, some bring out instruments to accompany their singing. Marie was getting dizzy and clutched the wall to steady herself. She braced herself to see the damage done in the kitchen, now with everyone crammed into it.

"That's what Marie Baggins hates!"

Marie's jaw dropped. All the plates and bowels had been washed and stacked perfectly on the clean table with the dwarves and Gandalf standing around it, laughing at her expression, Kili the most vocal about it. "Just look at that face!" He and Balin were leaning eachother laughing away.

"If you find the face of one who's just about to have a bleeding heart attack you have a very sick sense of ...

Bang Bang Bang!

" ... humor ..."

All the dwarves went silent, and turned their heads to the door. They knew who it was.

"He is here." Gandalf broke the silence.

Marie groaned and cupped her face in her hands, "I can't deal with another one." Ori patted her on the shoulder in an attempt to comfort her.

"I shall answer the door Marie, take your time." Gandalf said and mover to the front door. Perhaps he worn her out a little too early, but dwarves were ease to get used to.

He opened the wrong door to reveal the long awaited king himself, Thorin Oakensheild. "Gandalf." He acknowledged the wizard, "You told me this place would be easy to find. I lost my way twice." Everyone clamored to get a glimpse of their leader, all except Maire how struggled to squeezed through.

"Wouldn't have found it at all hadn't it been for that mark on the door." As Thorin removed his traveling cloak and passed it to Kili, Marie finally got past the barricade in the doorway.

"Mark?" She tried to inspect it, but Gandalf quickly closed, "Yes, I hope you don't mind. I left it there this morning." He smiled, trying to defuses the hobbit's flaring anger.

"Mariellena Baggins, allow me to introduce the leader of our company, Thorin Oakensheild."

Marie got her first glance at the newest arrived and completely froze up. He was tall and broad, covered in think fur coat and an armoured tunic. He did not sport elaborate braids or beards like many of the others, but had long black hair streaked with lines of silver to match the his close cut beard. His eyes were intense as the bore down on her, assessing her.

Dwalin may have startled her on first appearance, but this man absolutely frightened her ... and she didn't know why.

"So ... this is the hobbit." He said in a deep voice, making Marie wrapped her arms about herself to protect herself. "Tell me Miss Baggins, have you done much fighting?" Thorin circled her.
"What?"

"Axe or sword? Which is your weapon?"

Marie finally regained some confidence and answered boldly, "I have never used either in my life I'll have you know."

"Thought as much. She looks more like a grocer than a burglar."

The dwarves all chuckled and headed into the living room. Thorin cast one last glance at her before brushing her aside completely. Marie on the other hand felt quite stumped and glanced up at Gandalf.

"I feel like I should be insulted ... I just don't know how. And what did he mean by 'Burglar'?"
A Burglar's Contract

Things became surprisingly calmer once Thorin was settled at the table with a bowl of stew and a tankard of ale. Perhaps the presence of their leader kept the dwarves in order or something along those lines. Regardless, this change in atmosphere was a welcomed one in Marie's mind.

She was allowed to gather her thoughts as she clean the last of the pots lest in the small sink. As she did, the rest of the company including Gandalf all sat about the dining room table, tankards and pips in hand and they spoke. The occasional laughter could be heard as they continued to reconnect over lost times.
Marie felt quite the stranger in her own home.

"So what news of the meeting? Did they all come?" Balin asked, turning the conversation to more serious matters. All the dwarves nodded and focused on Thorin.

"Aye, envoys from all seven kingdoms." Thorin nodded, and an excited murmur spread across the table, the younger dwarves grew restless with anticipation. "And what do the dwarves of the Iron Hills say?" Dwalin asked. "Is Dain with us?"

Thorin's face dropped and he took a deep breath, reading himself more than anyone for the news, "They will not come. They say that this quest is ours, and ours alone."

The company looked about each other with mixed reactions. Some disappointed, some frustrated and others seemed unsure.

"A quest?"

No one had noticed Maire standing behind Gandalf, "Is this what you meant this morning?" She rubbed her arms nervously, wondering if she was intruding on things she had no say in. "Marie dear. Perhaps it is best you see this."

Gandalf reached into his robes and pulled out a folded map. The table was cleared so that it could be spread out. None of the other dwarves other than Thorin had seen its contents and were all keen to know what it held. Marie shuffled around to be beside Gandalf to have a better look, but this also meant standing next to Thorin. The dwarf king could see her resignation and fear of him, for she tried to etch herself closer to the wizard. She had not dared to meet his eye since they were introduced.

"Far to the East, over ranges and rivers, beyond woodlands and wastelands lies a single solitary peak." Gandalf explained and pointed to the images on the paper. Marie leaned in close to read it. It was a map of a single mountain with both the common tongue and dwarfish runes written, as well as various town names and markers.

At the top of the map there was another name, with a dragon drawn in bright red ink beside it.

"The ... Lonely ... Mountain." She muttered, reading out loud to herself.

"Aye. Oin has read the portence and the portence say it is time." Gloin said, nodding to his brother, who took over speaking. All listened but Bombor, who was still finishing off the scraps from dinner. "Ravens have been seen flying back to the mountain, as it was foretold. When the birds of Yore return to Erebor, the reign of the Beast will end."

This was the first time Marie was hearing any of this. "Um ... what beast?"
"Oh, that be a reference to Smaug the Terrible. Chiefest and greatest calamity of our age." Bofur answer indifferently. Marie looked back done at the map, more specifically the red dragon above the mountain.

"Air born fire breather. Teeth like razors, claws like meat hooks, extremely fond of precious metals ..."

"I get it. A dragon." Marie held up a hand to stop his rambling.

There was the sound of a scrapping chair as Ori suddenly stood up, "I'm not afraid, I'm up for it. I'll give him the taste of dwarfish iron right up his jaxie!" Marie gasped and covered her mouth while the company all laughed and praised the little dwarf's courage. Dori just pulled him back down by his ear. "Not in front of a lady."

Balin sighed and spoke as the voice of reason, "The task would be difficult enough with an army behind us, but we number just thirteen. And not thirteen of the best, nor brightest."

The dwarves took offence to this, but Balin was in most cases right.

"We may be few in numbers, but we're fighters. All of us, to the last dwarf." Fili said proudly. Marie glanced around the group, only picking some as actual fighters, the rest ... not so much. Kili backed up his brother's statement, "And you forget we have a wizard in our company. Gandalf would have killed hundreds of dragons."

"Well now, I wouldn't say ..." Gandalf started to deny it but Dori cut him off. "How many dragons have you killed?"

But the wizard refused to answer and pretended to cough on his smoking pipe. Marie guessed that he had never killed a dragon.

This caused an uproar, which meant more shouting. Bifur and Nori leapt up from the seats and there looked like a fight would break out. Marie groaned and moved into the hallway in a vain attempt to escape the noise. *Why must dwarves be so vocal about things?* She pinched the bridge of her nose.

The was a thunderous shout that made Marie jump right out of her skin and everyone else grew silent. The owner of such a noise was Thorin himself, who had remained quiet until now. "If we have read these signs, do you not think that others have as well? Rumors have begun to spread. The dragon Smaug has not been seen in sixty years." He stood tall, almost covering the whole opening. Marie could see nothing but his broad back as she stepped further away.

"Eyes look to the east assessing, weighing the risks. Perhaps the vast wealth of our people now lies unprotected. Do we just sit back while others claim what is rightfully ours, or do we seize this chance to take back Erebor!?"

There was so much passion laced in each word that it inspired new determination in each of the dwarves, who agreed with his words fully. Marie could now see why he was their leader.

"You forget that the front gate is sealed. There is no way into the mountain." Balin raised his voice over the cheers of the other.

"Not quite my dear Balin." Gandalf twirled his fingers and a strange key made from black iron appeared seemingly out of thin air. Thorin's eyes widened as he recognized the dwarvish work. "How come you by this?"

"It was given to me by your father, Thrain, for safe keeping." Gandalf handed the key to him, "It is yours now."

Thorin held the iron key before him, releasing what it meant.

"The runes on the map speak of a hidden passage to the lower halls of Erebor." Gandalf pointed out. Kili slapped his brother's shoulder, "There's another way in." He grinned. "If we can find, but
dwarf doors are invisible when closed." Gandalf shrugged and looked back down at the map. "The answer lies hidden in this map and I do not have the skills to find, but there are others in Middle Earth who can. The task I have in mind will require are great deal of stealth and no small amount of courage."

"That's why we need a burglar." Stated Ori and all eyes fell on the hobbit, who was still standing alone in the corridor. "By the looks of it, you'll need an expert." She shrugged, oblivious that she herself was the burglar in question.

"And are you?"

Marie finally noticed that she was being stared at by thirteen dwarves and a wizard. "Who, me?" She pointed at herself.

"She said she's an expert." Oin cheered, completely mishearing her.

"What? No, no, no, no." Marie waved her hands frantically, "I'm not a burglar. I've never stolen in my ..."

"What about Harold Burrow? You used to pickpocket his handkerchief at your Old Took's birthday gathering." Gandalf asked, causing Marie to become even more flustered. "That doesn't count Gandalf. I gave it back to him ..." "Only when he could find you. I remember you managed to steal it twelve times one year." The wizard went on to say, more so to the dwarves than Marie, who was beetroot red.

"Well ... Harold is a half-wit anyway, hardly a challenge." She grumbled, backing herself into the wall.

Some of the dwarves laughed at her, but Balin seemed more positive. "Well, the best burglars are those you would least expect after all, and I certainly would never had picked Miss Baggins for one." He said.

"But still," Dwalin shook his head in disagreement, "The wild is no place for gentle folk who can neither fight nor defend for themselves."

Marie was both grateful and irritated. She could defend herself if she tried, but had never needed to.

Disagreement and confusion broke out again, which angered Gandalf.

"Enough!" The air around him grew dark and heavy, like his very being was expanding and filling the room with shadows. Everyone leaned away to try and escape, only Thorin remained unaffected. "If I say Marie Baggins is a burglar then a burglar she is." the shadow slowly faded into oblivion as Gandalf returned to his usual self. Once all was normal, Marie let go of the doorway she had braced herself against.

"Hobbits are remarkably light on their feet, and can pass unseen by most if they choose. Now while the dragon is accustomed to the smell of dwarf, the scent of a hobbit is all but unfamiliar to him."

Gandalf explained and Marie felt a pit of woe form in her stomach. 'I'm not being sent into a dragon's den am I?'

The wizard turned his focus onto Thorin, "You asked me to find the fourteenth member of this company, and I have chosen Maire." Gandalf gave her a look, with the message "Trust me" dancing in his eyes. "There is a lot more to Marie than you see. She is faster and more light footed than the average hobbit, with a knack for climbing. She has a great deal to offer than any of you know, including herself."

Thorin sighed and glanced at Marie under his dark eyelashes. She was so slight and looked as though a gust of wind could blow her over. What could this mere ... woman offer to their quest? But Gandalf did have a point, the dragon would not know her scent, and she was remarkably quiet. "You must trust me on this." Gandalf pleaded.

Thorin relented and agreed. "Alright, give her the contract." He motioned to Balin who took care of legal matters. He produced said contract it out to Marie. "Just the usual. Summary of pocket expensive, time requiary, funeral arrangements."

Marie was taken aback, "Funeral arrangements?"

Thorin grew impatient and took the contract, only to shove it at Marie. "Hey." She tried to glare at the dwarf, but even facing away from her she felt timid and ceased complaining.
'Do I get any say in this?' She sighed and began reading the lengthy terms and conditions.

With her back to them, Thorin took this chance to mutter to Gandalf his own terms for agreeing to the new addition. "I can not guaranty her safety, nor will I be responsible for her fate." He said, plain and simple. Gandalf really had no option. He would take sole charge of Marie's well being. The colour left Marie's face as she read the contract. "... Injuries limited to ... laceration. Evisceration and ... Incineration?" She felt a wave of nausea hit her.

"Oh aye, melt the flesh off ya bone in the blink of an eye." Bofur was more than glad to answer, not understanding that such an answer made her feel even more sicker. She doubled over trying to steady her unsettled nerves.

"Are ya alright there lass?" Balin raised himself up to see better.

"Umm ... Yes. Ah no I feel ... bit faint." Maire placed a hand to her throat, swallowing lungfuls of air.

"Think furnace with wings." Bofur chimed in. "Yes, I see ..."

"Flash of light ..."

"Thank you, I get it ..."

"Searing pain, then poof, you're nothing more than a pile of ash."

Gandalf shot a glare at Bofur to silence him, then looked back at Marie. She looked like she was thinking hard about something, about what was anyone's guess. She looked up and found herself staring directly at Thorin. The two looked eyes for a few seconds before Marie dropped the contract and fell to her knees, "I need a moment." She muttered feebly.

Her unexplainable fear for the man was her breaking point.

The first to react were Gandalf and Bofur, then Kili and Fili, "Is she alright?" "Nice going Bofur." They called from the other end of the table. Bofur shrugged apologetically and moved out of the dining room to kneel by Marie. "Sorry lass." He mumbled led as he rubbed her back. With the surprising help from Dwalin, Marie had made it on shaky legs to her armchair, holding her face in her hands and hyperventilating. Gandalf kept her company as her mild panic attack subsided while the rest of the company thought out of curtsy to their reluctant hostess, it best to give her a few minutes, though Dori brewed her a cup of tea.

"Excuse me Miss Baggins," He gracefully handed her the steaming mug, "A little something to help calm the nerves."

"Oh, thank you Dori." She gave him a weak smile. She sipped the hot tea and found it to be quite a pleasant taste. Gandalf quietly asked him to leave them in order to have a good chat with Marie. He dropped the contract on her lap.

"Tell me Marie, when did dollsies and dishes become so important to you?" Gandalf sighed, "I remember a young hobbit who was always off looking for elves in the wood, who would stay out late and come home trailing mud, twigs and fireflies. You and that cousin of yours, Alistair Took, were the bane of every farmer with all the exploring you would do on their lands."

Marie's hand tightened around the boiling mug. Once she was that girl, but not anymore.

"You would speak of nothing but finding out what lay beyond the Shire and Bree ..."

"Times change Gandalf and people grow up. I'm a Baggins of Bag End."

"You are also a Took." Gandalf stated.

"And I've never heard the end of it." She sighed, placing her cup on a book which sat balanced on the arm rest.

"Did you know that your great great great-granduncle Bullroarer was so huge that he could ride a horse?" Gandalf asked. Marie just nodded, for she had heard this story many times before.

"Well he could. In the Battle of the Green Fields he charged the ranks of the goblins. He swung his club so hard that it knocked the Goblin King's head clean off so that it sailed a hundred yards through the air and went down a rabbit-hole, and thus the battle was won, and the game of Golf was invented at the same time."

"I've never heard that version." Marie said flatly.

"Well, all good stories need a bit of embellishment, and knowing you talents for stories you'll have
"a tale or two to tell when you come back." Gandalf smiled and sat himself on a tiny stool. It was only here in the glow of the fire place that he saw years of sadness and defeat etched in her eyes, which were turned away from the wizard and focused on a small portrait sitting on the mantelpiece. The round frame had an image of a young hobbit, with soft blonde curls and a devilish grin spread across his face.
"Can you promise that I will come back?" Her voice was no more than a sigh, tired and almost lonely.
"No. And if you do you will not be the same." Gandalf was honest with his answer. Marie eyes moved away from the picture and she plucked the contract up from her lap.
"I can't ... Gandalf I really ..." She stood up and gently handed the paper to the wizard, "I'm not that hobbit anymore, I'm so sorry." She hung her head and walked out of the living room and presumably to her bedroom.
Her departure did not go unnoticed. Thorin and Balin watched the hobbit walk away. "It appears we have lost our burglar." Balin sighed and leant against the wooden walls of the hobbit hole.
Thorin however did not seem as troubled. As he thought earlier, this woman would not be able to handle this quest, her behaviour was proof of that. She was doing herself a kindest for saying no.

~*~
Marie felt terrible. She sat on the edge of her bed, staring into nothing as her body recovered. Within the space of a few short hours she had run the gamete of emotions, confusion, anger, surprise, fear, sadness and for the first time in almost twenty years, curiosity.
The dwarves' quest had genuinely caught her interest, and the way Thorin had spoke about it made it sound so worthwhile and exciting, even her blood had stirred.
As she removed her cardigan, she heard a noise, deep and powerful, emanating from down the hallway. The noise became a tune, rising and falling in volume and strength. It was the dwarves whose voices pierced the very foundation of Bag End
Marie dared not to move.
One voice rose above the rest.
"Far over the Misty Mountains cold. To dungeons deep and caverns old." Marie had never heard such a sad voice before. Hobbits did not sing of sorrow or hardship, favouring songs of dancing, merriment and drinking.
"We must away, ere break of day, to find our long forgotten gold." The sheer sadness in the voice touched something within her, a pining for something. For a moment Marie was filled with a strange sensation of longing. She closed her eyes and listened closely as more voices joined.
"The pines were roaring on the high. The winds were moaning in the night. The fire was red, it flaming spread, the trees like torches blazed with light." Marie fell into a deep slumber, dreaming of burning trees.
~*~
The twittering larks of the early morning woke Marie, still propped up against the bed frame. She let out a groan as she rubbed the sleep out of her eyes. The candles had burnt up and there was a lingering smell of tobacco in the air.
The smell reminded her off what had passed that night and she quickly got up to investigate. She checked every room expecting to find a dwarf, but it looked as though there was never anyone there that night, apart from the empty pantry. She finished her sweep in the living room, find only a few burnt out candles and a single tankard.
Marie sighed and looked about her.
They were gone
Before the silence surrounding her would not had crossed her mind, but now after such a loud and rambunctious night of food, song and tales of adventure, it was too quiet. Had it always been this quiet?
Out of the corner of her eye she saw that the contract had been left behind. It was just sitting on her armchair neatly. The word 'Burglar' and the blank space next to it were the first thing she read.
'Traveling on an unfamiliar path is not the hardest part of a journey Marie ... it's taking the first step forward.' She felt a restlessness brewing within her. Should she stay where life was simple and
controllable ... or could she risk revisiting old dreams once more and trust her life in Fate's fickle hands?
The long line of ponies trotted slowly along the main path out of the Shire with the company. Gandalf of course lead the charge with Thorin right behind him. They had departed from Bag End before dawn but had wasted a good deal of time in gathering the necessary provisions, curtsy of Bombur and Bifur. Just as Thorin thought there would be no more disruptions, a voice called out from the woods behind them.

"Wait!"

One by one, the dwarves halted their ponies and turned to look.

What they saw was a hobbit with chestnut hair bounding towards them, wearing brown felt pants and a burgundy jacket and holding a piece of paper in hand. Gandalf smiled to himself while Thorin and a few of the older dwarves look on with surprise.

Marie Baggins had come along after all.

"Sorry I'm late." She panted as she run up to Balin's pony, holding the contract aloft, "I signed it." Balin took the contract and inspected it with a monocle. Marie glanced over at Gandalf, now beaming. "Marie my dear, isn't that your father's best jacket?" He asked.

Marie looked down at her appearance. The jacket itself was quiet big on Marie, as he father was a tubby hobbit, but thankfully his pants and waistcoat fitted nicely. Her hair was in a mess from a hasty attempt at a braid. "I was in a hurry so I grabbed the first one I saw."

As she spoke, she noticed a piece of wood latched onto Thorin's saddle. It was an Oak branch by the looks of it, just long enough to cover a man's arm. Now she knew why the dwarf called himself 'Oakenshield' but still.

"Why an Oak branch?"

"Well, everything seems to be in order." Balin said loudly so that Thorin could hear, "Welcome Miss Baggins to the company of Thorin Oakenshield." Balin smiled and winked at her. Marie finally let go of the breath she had been hold, for the entire time she had been running she had been worried that they would perhaps so no.

"Give her a pony." Thorin commanded, his indifference to the hobbit's presence all too clear to Marie. She stared at the back of his head as he already moved his pony away, feeling slightly annoyed at his rudeness. Her glaring was cut off as two strong hands lifted her clean off her feet. "Hey careful!" Fili and Kili held her up and settled her on one of the extra ponies.

"I can walk you know." She said as a pair of reigns was shoved into her hands. "Not all the way to Erebor love. Besides, you'll like Murtle." Fili said, stirring himself away once she was settled. She awkwardly held up the reigns while her pony followed on in the line. Gandalf moved from his position at the head of the line to ride beside Marie, as to keep a better eye on her.

"Come on Nori, pay up!" Oin, who was riding behind Marie called. Nori tossed a small purse over her head which Oin gleefully caught.

There were a few more purses tossed before Marie questioned Gandalf about it. "They took wages on whether or not you would turn up." He explained.

"Huh. And what did you think?" As she spoke, another purse was tossed and caught by Gandalf. "I never doubted you for a second my dear."
"Oh, well ahhh ... that's rea aahhh ... reassuring aaaACHOO!"

All the horse hair made Marie sneeze loudly. Her pony scampere off the trail and started to paw at the ground. The company halted again as Marie began to panic and tried pulling the reigns, but it did more harm than good. Kili jumped off his pony and attempted to be the hero, reaching for the scared animal.

"Aaaaahhh ease Murtle, good pony." Marie shaky voice did not sooth the pony, only making Gloin, Dwalin and Bofur laugh. Kili finally caught the reign and pulled the pony back into line. "There that's better." He took one look at the petrified hobbit and had to try with all his might to contain his laughter. Fili too was struggling to keep a straight voice.

"Marie, are you alright?" Gandalf asked seriously. She had gone quite pale and her teeth were gritted together.

"Did you know it was going to do that?" Marie clutched her saddle desperately.

"Well, Murtle is ... sensitive." Fili rode up alongside her, "We thought you two would make a great pair."

"I have never ridden a pony in my life." The glares the two brothers got from her only made them laugh even more.

"Enough. Move one!" Thorin barked from the head of the party.

'Well ... great. I'm a member barely five minutes and I'm already a joke and a burden." Marie wished to be walking, but kept her mouth shut to prevent Thorin from disliking her even more.

"Take heart Marie, it can only get easier from here on out." The wizard spoke kind words to raise her spirits again. Marie could only hope that it would.

~*~

The gentle green of the Shire faded behind them with each passing day, and with it the feeling of familiarity for Marie. For her, the world seemed to expand and grow bigger as soon as they crossed over the Brandywine Bridge. Open fields and hills became dry rocky plains stretching over the land, and even the dense forests held a more sinister nature to them.

Marie of course was the only one affected by such a change and was constantly watching the goings on around her, and never in front of her.

She was rusty when it came to basic survival skills and often found herself tripping on her own feet while exploring their campsites and being scolded for letting her pony trail off the path one too many times.

This made her an easy target for Fili and Kili's mischief, as they would constantly tease her and spook her.

She attempted to have decent conversations with some of the dwarves, but there was always some argument or some joke that distracted the company and left Marie completely in the dark on her own.
But she was not the only one to sit quietly on the side lines. Thorin himself seemed content with only watching his rowdy company. Occasionally Marie saw his eyes pull away from the camp and glance out at the surrounding terrain. Though the others took it in turns watching over the camp, Thorin was always keeping one eye open just in case. Marie found this a noble trait, even if Thorin had not once acknowledged her fully as a member. At times she caught him casting a fleeting glance her way, but in his eyes there was always something of discontentment which made her feel even more insecure around him.

One night, they had made camp on high ground, giving them a good view over the land below in case of any surprise attacks. Fili and Kili were both given the first watch of the night and sat by the small fire for warmth. All but Gandalf and Marie were fast asleep. Gandalf sat back in the shadows with his own pipe, deep in contemplation about their plans while Marie simply stared up at the stars above her, picking out the different patterns to pass the time.

She had learned how to pick them out long ago ... by a dear friend long gone.

After endless nights of camping with them, the dwarves' snoring was still preventing her from sleeping. Bombur was the worst. Marie sighed and adjusted her arms folded under her head, only to feel a spider crawl up her arm. She let slip a small squeak and shot upright, shaking her arm wildly to be rid of it. She almost hit poor Bombur as she did.

Kili looked up from his pipe and stared at the hobbit, "Ya all right Marie?" He softly asked.

"I'm alright. I'm alright. Bloody spiders." Marie gave an involuntary shiver. She hated spiders.

She stretched her arms and decided to walk off her little scare. She walked over to the ponies and gave Murtle a good scratch. In fact her relationship with her pony was the only thing to improve in the passing weeks of traveling.

A screech echoed across the night air, making the ponies and Marie tense up immediately. It sounded like a dying bird, a very dangerous and nasty bird.

The brothers also tensed up as well, Kili automatically reaching for his bow.

"What was that?" Marie made the wise choice to move back into the camp and away from whatever was making that awful noise.

"Orcs. Throat cutters." Fili said passively. "There'll be dozens of them out there. The lower lands are crawling with them."

"Orcs?" Marie said a little too loudly out of sheer panic. Thorin was awake in seconds and poised ready, Balin as well.

"They strike in the dead of night when everyone's asleep, no screams ... just lots and lots of blood." Kili said quietly. Marie felt her heart rate go up and she looked around expecting to have one pop out at her. The brothers however chuckled at her over reaction.

"You think that's funny?" Thorin growled at his two nephews. "You think a night raid by Orcs is a joke?"

Kili looked down sheepishly, 'We didn't mean anything by it."

"No you didn't." Thorin stood and walked passed Marie, the fur of his coat brushing her hands. Marie pulled away from the dwarf as he headed to the outskirts of the camp, but not before Marie heard him mutter, "You know nothing of the world."
Fili and Kili looked put down by his word and glanced at each other.

"Don't mind him, laddie." Balin said, "Thorin has more cause than most to hate Orcs."

Balin looked over at him, now standing alone as he stared off into the distance. "After the dragon took the Lonely Mountain, King Thror tried to reclaim the ancient dwarf kingdom of Moria... but our enemy had got there first." Marie found herself slowly sitting down by the fire as Balin told his tale. Fili and Kili too were drawn into the story.

"Moria had been taken by legions of Orcs, led by the most vile of all their race, Azog the Defiler." Some of the other dwarves had woken now and listened in. "The giant Gundabad Orc had sworn to wipe out the line of Durin. He began by beheading the King." Marie pulled her legs in closer, her toes clenching the grass. "Thrain, Thorin's father, was driven mad by grief. He went missing, taken prisoner or killed; we did not know. We were leaderless. Defeat and death were upon us."

Balin's old face light up as he remembered it. Marie looked over at Thorin as Balin continued. She was seeing for the first time a great weight on those shoulders.

"That is when I saw him. The young dwarf prince facing down the Pale Orc. He stood alone against this terrible foe, his armour rent, wielding nothing but an oaken branch as a shield. Azog the Defiler learned that day that the line of Durin would not be so easily broken. Our forces rallied and drove the Orcs back. Our enemy had been defeated... but there was no feast or songs that night, for our dead were beyond the count of grief. We few had survived and I thought to myself then 'There is one I could follow. There is one I could call King'.'"

Thorin, who had been listening to his old companion's tale, finally turned to face the fourteen faces staring at him. Some were looking at him with admiration, others with utmost respect. He walked back through the camp, the company parting to make way. As he did he looked down at the hobbit curled up by the fire. Thorin noticed that there was a brightness in her eyes he had not yet seen before. They were like the embers in the fire that flickered softly with not just awe, but a gentle understanding.

Where had this spark been?

It died very quickly when she dropped her gaze. "What of the Pale Orc. What happened to him?"

She asked.

"He slunk back into to halls from whence he came. The filth died from his wounds long ago."

Thorin answered for her, hate seething with every word.

If any had been looking at Balin at the time, they would have seen his voice fall and his lip twitch into a frown. He glanced over at Gandalf, who too looked quite skeptical.

Thorin's statement that Azog had died years ago ... may not have been as accurate as he'd thought.
The next day, the weather turned for the worst. Cold winds from north cut through the air and brought dark rain clouds. The sky opened up and the company of fifteen were soaked to the bone, even in the refuge of the forest. The dwarves hid under their thick traveling cloaks with bitter frowns on their faces while Marie only had her burgundy coat for protection. Long strands of her hair had come loose from her braid and were plastered over her face and catching in her eyelashes.

"Mr Gandalf, can you do something about this deluge?" Dori called from the back of the line, having enough of the sour weather.

Marie looked up at the wizard, who was riding beside her again that day. His large grey had acted like a small tent for him, leaving his face and beard dry. "It is raining Master Dori and it will continue to rain until the rain is done." Gandalf stated in a matter of fact tone, "If you want to change the weather of the world you should find yourself another wizard."

"Are there other wizards?" Marie asked.

"Yes, five to be exact. The greatest of our order is Saruman the White. Then there are the two Blue Wizards ..." Gandalf's eyes wondered of for a moment, "You know I've quite forgotten their names. And the fifth would be Radagast the Brown."

"What kind of wizard is he? A great one or ... not so great?" Marie pushed the wet hair from her eye to see him better.

"I think he is great wizard, in his own way. He's a gentle soul who prefers the company of animals to other people and keeps a watchful eye over the great forests to the east." Gandalf looked down from his horse and smiled, "I think you would get along splendidly with him Marie."

Her eyebrows knitted together, "I hope you aren't implying that I am like an animal."

"No, no my dear." Gandalf reassured her, but quietly added on, "Well, maybe a mouse."

Marie pretended not to hear him.

The tree line ahead of the company began to thin out, replaced with a more rocky terrain and the sound of a river could be heard. As they neared the clearing, Gandalf saw that the river he had intended to cross over had been flooded. He spurred his horse ahead of the group to have a better look, his lips in a deep set frown.

The company halted along the edge of the river at the water rushed by. As they did they felt the rain start to ease into a light shower.

"Ah good. Seems the weather is turning." Gandalf said and looked up at the clouds.

"We must look for a crossing." Thorin barked over the noise.

"There is no crossing for miles, and the water is moving too fast for the ponies to cross." Gandalf protested calmly, "We should wait until the river dies down. It will be dusk soon anyway."
"We can't waste time Gandalf."

"It would also be good for the men. In my experience, a foul atmosphere can make any journey slower." Gandalf said this a little more quietly. Thorin glanced around at the men, and their burglar. They all share the same grim expressions.

"Alright." Thorin grumbled and dismounted, "We will set up camp back within the forest. Perhaps the trees will provide more suitable coverage."

The dwarves were more than happy to stop. Gloin, Nori and Ori pitched a makeshift tent large enough for all of them to squeeze in under and Bombur and Bofur made a start on some food. The rain had completely stopped by then, allowing Marie a chance to try to dry her cloths. Being completely aware that she was surrounded by men, Marie took great care in how she did so. She removed only her coat and waistcoat, wringing them out as best she could then hung them on a low branch to dry. She was freezing cold now and rubbed her arms to create some heat. If she wasn't careful she could get a cold.

As she was about to settled down, Bifur came shouting into the camp, carrying on about something and clutching at his hand. "Um, what's he saying?" Marie asked Bofur.

"Aahhh ... you really don't want to know lass. He was just patrolling when he suddenly started cursing." Bofur gestured towards the forest.

"Bifur, may I see your hand please?" She asked. The dwarf made a series of grunts that Maire could only interpret as a yes. She held his hand very carefully as she inspected it. Many of the dwarves were watching the drama from afar with curious eyes. On Bifur's palm there were several purple dots and nettle points stuck in the tough skin.

"As I though. You've been stung by Greta's Heart Bifur."

None of the dwarves had any clue what Marie was on about. "Bofur could you get me two bowls, one with water please?"

"Sure lass, but what for?"

"I need to clean the nettle toxin." Marie gently prodded the purple marks, making Bifur react violently to the pain. Bofur pulled her away from the swinging arms of his kin. Thorin was watching from afar as he always did, silent and passive. He had his head in the folds of his fur coat, fingers curled around the iron key Gandalf had given him. It was the symbol of hope that Erebor would once again belong to the dwarves, and barely ten feet away from him was the woman who would was to accomplish that.

How? Thorin still couldn't fathom that. Gandalf had called her a mouse before. Indeed, she looked like one. A small, wet, fragile mouse.

"You know, you could show her a little more curtsey." Thorin rolled his eyes as Gandalf approached, "She is trying. And as a member of your company she is entitled to some respect from you."

"I give respect when it is earned, and I have said I am not responsible for her."

Gandalf sighed and sat upon the rock. "I do not mean for you to be lenient just because she is a woman." Gandalf lit his pipe and inhaled a good long puff of the Old Toby. "Talk to her."

"She can't even look me in the eye for very long."
"Then don't growl."

Thorin shook his head at the wizard. His fingers tightened around the key as he looked back over at Marie. Bofur had given her the two bowls and a knife, which she held dangerously close to her arm as she went off somewhere.

Marie found the plant she was looking for at the base of one of the trees just outside the camp and walked closer to inspect it. It was a large bush of nettles with purple leaves that had grown into the trees base and had stretched up the trunk.

She knelt down and placed the bowls next to each other and went to fetch some Kingsfoil. She needed some in order to make a paste to properly clean the nettle stings. Luckily there was a small patch of the weed by another tree and she cut a good handful for herself.

"I see you are versed in medicinal plants."

Marie practically jumped out of her skin at the sound of Thorin's voice. She looked around and saw the dwarf's imposing frame, arms crossed over his chest and leaning against the tree with the Greta's Heart.

"How long has he been standing there?" "A little," She said once she had calmed down from her fright. "But I wouldn't say I'm an expert, I'm just very familiar with this one." She gestured to the nettle bush, "Some of the farmers outside Bree have them planted around their borders."

"And what would you be doing trespassing on their lands?" Thorin asked. Maire cleared her throat and rolled her shoulders casually. "That isn't any bodies business." Using the knife to hold up the nettles, she pulled out the purple leaves carefully. Thorin watched her work silently, not caring that he was causing her to feel uneasy.

"The ahh ... leaves have an anti toxin that ... counteracts the nettles." She started to ramble to distract herself from her discomfort. "It's not fatal but can sting for days after, just enough to keep the animals away."

"And hobbits it seems."

Marie wasn't sure if she should be more surprised that Thorin was making a joke than just actually talking with her. Either way, he wasn't speaking to her with his usual gruff attitude, so she started to feel less scared of him.

"Why would something with poison be called 'Greta's Heart'?"

"Because of this." Marie opened a small hole in the bush with the knife, and revealed a single flowering blooming at its core. Thorin knelt down to have a better look, and was shoulder to shoulder with the hobbit. The flower itself was something he had never come across before, spanning the size if a closed hand. The fine petals were pure white, with flakes of red at the tips. Its centre was bulb of deep crimson and gold, like a precious gem caught in the light.

Thorin was intrigued and reached for it.

"Careful." Marie called, but he had already caught his fingers on the sharp nettles. His hissed and withdrew his hand quickly. "I did warn you." There was a trace of smugness in Marie's voice, for now the tables had turned on who scolded who.

It was then that she noticed that they were a little too close. She discreetly shuffled over to put some distance between them. "I'm not sure what it's actually called, but folk associate it to the old
fable." Marie pulled the knife away and the flower disappeared from sight. She collected the leaves together and shredded them into smaller pieces.

"Fable?"

"Aye. My grandmother used to tell it to me. It is the tale of a young maiden named Greta, a maiden with the purest heart in all the land. She could charm the wildest of beasts and soothe the most restless of minds, and when she sang, flowers would bloom all around her. She was selfless and kind, with healer's hands and child like eyes that shone like the moon when she was holding a secret."

Marie began to grind the shredded leaves with the Kingsfoil in the empty bowl as she told the story.

"But, with a heart so pure came an equally pure beauty, and it brought her nothing but sorrow. For in men's hearts lies lecherous greed, and men came far and wide for her hand ... and her body. Greta knew of the fickle nature of a man's affection and was terrified of her heart being broken. So great was her fear that she cut out her own heart."

"She would rather never love at all than risk loving at all?"

Marie nodded her head and mixed the water in with the leaves. There was an earnest look about her as she worked.

"Yes. As she hid her heart in a nearby shrub, her tears fell on the leaves. They turned to nettles and guarded the pure heart from any who would seek to harm it. Greta however died not long after of loneliness, for without her heart she forgot who she was."

The purple paste was ready and she held out a hand to Thorin. He just stared at it confused.

"Do you want to have your fingers stinging for days?" Marie flexed her hand, indicating him to give her his own.

Thorin was taken aback but her sudden confidence with him and complied with her wish. She scooped up the paste with two fingers and began applying it evenly along Thorin's fingertips. Though they were small in comparison to his, they were calloused and firm, the hands of a hard worker. The paste was cool against the skin and Thorin felt the stinging easing.

"It is a shame that such a beautiful flower can't be seen." Thorin said to pass the time.

"Well it can be, under the right circumstances."

"You mean if someone is willing dig through poisonous nettles and harm themselves."

"Isn't that what you're doing?" Marie asked, "Risking a dragon's wrath for your people's treasure? Your home? When the reward is great enough, just about anyone will put themselves in harm's way."

Thorin would have never guessed her to be so profound.

"It doesn't look too bad, so it should be fine in a few minutes." Marie said when she was done. Her hand felt warm against his.

Thorin jerked his hand from her's and left quite suddenly.

He did not even thank her.
Marie was puzzled by his odd behavior. First he ignored her presence, then out of nowhere talked to her, then he was back to brushing her aside. She spent the rest of that evening picking out nettles from Bifur's hand, with the help of Bofur and Kili who restrained him for the ordeal. Amidst the dwarvish swearing and grunt, Marie took no notice of it and was wrapped up in her own thoughts.

Her patient hands and focused face was watched from afar by the king.

Chapter End Notes

Just a little filler chapter :) Also I made a trailer for the 'An Unexpected Journey' portion of the story that you can watch here
A Prelude to Trouble

Seeking to make up for lost ground, Thorin roused the company before dawn the next morning. They fumbled around in the darkness searching for their belonging and tacked up the ponies one by one. Marie tried to roll up her spread, but it hurt her to open her eyes. She was not used to such an early and rough awakening and felt like someone had sucked the sense of equilibrium out of her head.

"You best hurry up Marie," Kili knelt down and helped her, "Thorin doesn't take kindly to those who dawdle."

"Mmmhggnn." She was too tired to form proper words and just rubbed her face. Her coat was still damp and brought a chill to her bones.

Kili saw a wonderful chance to try a new prank. "I wouldn't dawdle," He plucked a fresh sprig of grass and lightly brushed it over her ear, "The spiders are out this morning."

Marie leapt up and shook her hair. "Get it off!" Fili and Kili laughed heartily, but quickly shut their mouths when their uncle approached the hysterical hobbit. Marie was still preoccupied in getting rid of the spider that she bumped into him. His hands gripped her arms tightly to stop her thrashing about, but also had them facing one another. She would have enjoyed the warmth his hands brought to her cold arms if she wasn't so terribly embarrassed.

"Stop." Thorin commanded. Marie did so quickly, her face bright red. Luckily it was still too dark for him to see it.

Once he was out of ear shot, Marie turned on her heels and smacked Kili in across the head. "That was not funny." She growled.

Kili stood and rubbed his sore head. "I thought it was hysterical. Perhaps you'll be fully awake next time" He said with a big grin and tried the same trick again just to tease her.

Unbeknownst to him, Marie was already plotting revenge.

They finished packing up and were once again on the Great East Road in a long line. An hour after the sun finally rose from behind the rocky pass, Marie decided to engage in a conversation.

"Kili?" He craned his head and looked back at her, "What is Erebor like?"

"Why the sudden interest?"

"Well it occurred to me that I ran off into the wilderness with no idea as to where I'm actually going, besides there being a large sum of treasure at the end ... and a dragon"

"A very large treasure you mean." Kili corrected her, "The gold and precious jewels fill almost every hall of Erebor, or so I'm told."

"It was said that King Thoro hoarded gold and created his own labyrinth, where he would wonder aimlessly through it, the shining jewels lighting his steps." Fili said from behind them. "Really?" Marie's eyes were wide. The idea of a labyrinth of gold astounded her, but that was not what she wanted to know. "But what of the mountain itself? I mean is it a big mountain, and what of the inside?"
"Wouldn't have a clue." Kili shrugged.

"You mean ... you've never ... seen it?" Marie asked.

"The Lonely Mountain was taken over two hundred years ago, long before we were born." Fili trotted up along side Marie, not wanting to be left out.

Marie whistled, "Two hundred years."

"Yes. Uncle and Balin are the only ones among us who lived through the attack on Erebor." Kili pointed to the two who rode up ahead.

"Wait, they actually lived there? But Thorin doesn't look much older than me." Maire said, baffled by this latest piece of news.

"Well, how old are you then?" Kili asked innocently. His brother shook his head at his naive little brother. Maire pursed her lips and answered for the sake of conversation. "I'm forty nine." She said stifly.

"That young?" The brothers asked together. Marie looked between them a little confused. "Young? Good gracious I'm not young."

Fili cleared his throat and explained. "Because of the long life expectancy of dwarves, they aren't considered full fledged adults until they are about ninety or so. I myself am eighty two and Kili is still only a boy of seventy seven."

'Only seventy seven?!' Marie was lucky that she looked and felt as good as she was now at forty nine. "Hey, so is Ori!" Kili defended himself, not liking that Fili was purposefully teasing him in front of Marie.

"For hobbits, we become 'adults' when we turn thirty three." Marie ignored Kili's little tantrum and continued speaking with Fili.

"So, you are still looked upon as children until then?" Fili asked.

"No, it's just natural that by then one would be looking to settle down, marry and so on."

"If that is the case, why aren't you? Married I mean. Or was your husband away on business that night?"

"No, I'm not married. The answer to that is rather simple."

"What?"

"No one's ever asked me."

While two talked Kili reached into his pocket for his pipe, figuring it would kill the boredom. He dug around for a second then looked in another pocket. It was nowhere to be found. He patted himself down frantically for it, but still couldn't find it. His behavior caught Fili and Marie's attention.

Fili gave his brother an odd look before glancing sideways at Marie. It was then he noticed the pipe she was twirling in her hand.

"Damn it," Kili huffed, "Blasted pipe ... OW!"
Marie had tossed the pipe into the back of his head, where it made very satisfying \textit{thunk}. It fell into his hood as he tried to catch it. "How did? When?" He looked around at the guilty hobbit, how just shrugged. "Consider us even." She said.

"Nibble hands ya have there." Fili chuckled. It appeared that Gandalf wasn't lying about her skills as a pickpocket. He checked his own pocket for his pipe, just in case.

The rest of that day went a lot faster than Marie realized thanks to Fili and Kili. It was the first time she had a descant talk with some of her companions and she actually noticed just how young they were compared to herself. They reminded her of two adolescences finding their own personalities and just running wild with them. In fact their energy was reminiscent of her and her cousin at their \textit{age}.

Thorin brought the company to a halt on the side of a rocky slope that encroached on small forest that looked to be grown from the rocks.

Further up ahead lay the ruins of a small farm house, and judging by the water damage and rotting, it had been abandoned for a very long time.

"We will make camp here for the night. Fili, Kili you watch over the ponies. Oin get a fire going."

Marie gladly dismounted. Maybe she would sleep better that night. Gandalf walked passed her in a sort of daze, staring around at the ruins. He was recalling something.

"Gandalf?" Looked up at the wizard, but he didn't hear her.

"This place ..." He walked towards it, leaving Marie just standing there. She had gotten used to his \textit{moments}. It was like another person had taken over him, and he would sporadically shift his attitude.

She shrugged and began unloading Murtle's saddle, but also kept an eye on the wizard as he looked about the house.

"I think it would be wiser to move on." He said loudly. But Thorin did not take heed to the warning. The dwarf and the wizard spoke in hushed tones while the company were busy. Kili passed by the distracted Marie and attempted to steal her handkerchief, just to see how easy it was to pickpocket. But that was a foolish decision.

"Don't even try it Kili." Marie sighed. She could sense his twitching fingers at the hem of her pocket, "You're an amateur."

Kili pulled his head away in surprise. She had her back to him and still she could sense him. Balin chuckled and strolled over to Marie. "My faith in our burglar is strengthening." He grinned and stroked Murtle's snout. He alone had witnessed Marie's talent in action that morning and was impressed that she got past the two sharpest eyes in the company. "Tell me Miss Maire, where did you learn such skills."

"By accident I suppose." Marie answered, "I just wanted to annoy a certain hobbit. I ..."

She was interrupted by a very angry wizard brush past her, grumbling to himself.

"Gandalf where are you going?"

"To seek the company of the only one that's got any sense around here Miss Baggins."
Marie cocked her head, "Whose th."

"Myself! I've had enough of dwarves for one day." Gandalf thundered as he stormed back the way they came.

Murtle shook her head up and down, giving Marie a soft whinny.

"Yes I know. Odd." Marie pattered her neck as she spoke.

None of the company knew how to react to the wizard's departure, nor were any of them sure if he would be back anytime soon. Thorin did not care. He would be damned if he follow Gandalf's advice and make for the Hidden Valley.

There was no way he would degrade himself to seek held from elves. His pride would not let him.

"Come on Bombur. Get some food going." He ordered. The large hobbit nodded and rummaged for the bowls.

None of the dwarves went near their leader after the argument. Thorin's temper was formidable and to provoke him would be a dangerous move, especially in his current state.

Unfortunately Marie hadn't known him that long, and made that mistake. He watched her step lightly towards him out of the corner of his eye, wishing for her not to bring up the topic again.

"How is ...?"

"This matter does not concern you." He barked walked straight passed her, intent on ignoring her.

"I was just ... asking about your hand."

Thorin slowed a little.

"I mean your fingers. Are the marks gone?" There was a little concern in her voice, but there was apprehension.

Thorin looked down at his hand. There were no traces of the nettle stings.

"Your cure has done its work." He said quietly, but not so quiet so that she did not hear it. "At least you've proven some use, though very little."

"That's good." That was all she murmured before leaving him alone again.

His eyes betrayed him and he watched her pass by him. He could see her head was kept down and she had crossed her arms over her chest, a motion she usually did when she felt threatened. Somehow Thorin felt a pang of guilt within him.

Was it because he had yelled at her? Or was because he belittled her again?

He had done so in the past, so why did it feel different now?

~*~
It grew late in the night and there was still no sign of Gandalf. While the dwarves did not seem so troubled by the loss of the wizard, Marie grew uneasy, and began pacing the length of the ruined house.

"Marie." Bofur called from the fire, "Could you take these to the lads." He held out two bowls of gruel, but still she pace. "Is everything alright Marie?"

"I don't know." She said chewing on a finger, "It feels ... I don't know, something's ... not right."

"You're just worried that Gandalf isn't back yet." Bofur said casually, but Maire shook her head. "No, it's something else."

"Here." He handed the bowls to her and shooed her off, "It will keep your mind off it."

Marie sighed and made her way to where the ponies were grazing. The bowls burned her fingers so she picked up the pace.

"Boys, dinner!" She called into the dark. She almost tripped up on a tree root when she found them. They stood with their backs to her, still as the trees that surrounded them.

They were never this still.

"What wrong?" Marie asked, stepping into the gap between them

"We're supposed to be looking after the ponies." Kili muttered.

"Only we've encountered a ... slight problem." Fili looked at Marie with a very worried expression. "We had sixteen, now there are only fourteen."
Swords and Words, the Better Weapon

"Perhaps they wandered off?" Marie said hopefully. Kili recounted the herd but Fili shook his head, "No these ponies are trained to remain together. They would not go too far." He walked carefully around the forest looking for clues. Marie placed the bowls of gruel on the remains of a wagon and joined in, "You really think they were stolen?"

Kili finished counting the ponies again, but still came up two short. "Daisy and Bungo are missing." He said as Marie and Fili stared at a freshly upturned tree. "This can't be good." Marie muttered and turned to leave, "I'll go tell Thorin."

"Ah, no Marie." Kili caught her arm and turned her back around, "Let's not bother him."

"But what ever took the ponies must have been huge, and very dangerous." She pointed to the tree, "Personally, I wouldn't want to be out here if it comes back."

"And I wouldn't want to be at the mercy of Thorin."

"Hey," Fili called the two over, "There's a light ahead."

Marie squinted her eyes and saw the light he was referring to. It was faint, mostly due to the overgrown fauna around them. The brothers took off towards it and Marie had no choice but to follow, for if she was left alone with a possible monster lurking about, she may not have had the courage to even scream for help. The trio ducked behind a log as the light grew stronger and gruff, almost guttural voices could be heard. A large shadow danced about the trunks, increasing Marie apprehension about this.

"Could it be men from around here?" She whispered to Kili, but the young dwarf knew better and frowned. "No. Trolls."

"What?!"

Kili acted impulsively and took off again, Fili and Marie close behind. As they got closer, the trees and bushes to their left groaned and snapped as something large stomped its way through the forest. The brothers and Marie hid quickly as it passed them, oblivious to the trio.

Marie got her first look at a troll. It was over ten feet tall, hunched and stocky with skin that looked like dried leather in the dim light. Every step it took it groaned and grunted, and under each arm it had a struggling pony. To Marie's horror, one of them was Murtle.

In every story she had heard about trolls there was always mention of their ungovernable hunger.

"We have to do something before they eat the ponies." She whispered to the brothers. They both looked at the small hobbit and thought the same thing.

"Yes." Kili snuck over to her and gave her a little push forward, towards danger. "Trolls are slow and stupid, so use that to your advantage."

"No, are you crazy? I can't ..." Marie paled at the thought of facing the trolls alone.

"You're so small and quiet, they'll never see you. It's perfectly safe and we'll be right behind you."

"This is as safe as juggling knives." Marie grumbled. Fili gave her another gentle push and
whispered into her ear, "If you run into trouble, hoot twice like a barn owl and once like a brown owl."

"Alright," Marie gave up resisting and took a step towards the danger, but stopped. "Wait, Kili I don't know what a brown owl sounds like." But when she looked back, the two had already scarpered. Marie groaned in frustration, but it was too late to do anything else other than investigate. She took a huge breath and quietly followed the trail left by the troll.

"Mutton yesterday, mutton today, and blimey if it don't look like mutton again ..."

"Quit your groaning, these ain't sheep, these is Westnads."

The troll camp, complete with a simmering fire with a cooking pot nestled in its heart, was settled at the side of a rock face and was littered with the bones and rotten leftovers of various animals. There was an unpleasant smell in the air, likely due to the remains and whatever the trolls were cooking in their large pot.

"I don't like horse, not enough fat on them." The slimmer one of trolls sniffled, and wiped his nose with a dirty cloth.

Who would have thought that trolls had handkerchiefs too?

Marie kept low and well hidden in the bushes. She counted three troll, but there may have been more. The one she had been following placed the two ponies in a makeshift pen with the other two already missing. The placement of the pen was behind the trolls, meaning Marie might have been able to free the ponies without any hitches, that is if the trolls didn't turn around. She began creeping around the edge of the camp, staying well out of the light while the trolls complained to one another about the cooking. She made to the pen, but Murtle snorted and started to make a racket at the sight of her. Marie tried to calm her down but the troll with the ladle and ragged leather apron heard the commotion and looked over his shoulder. All he saw was an agitated pony, and not the scared hobbit hiding behind it.

"I'm starving. Are we having horse tonight or what?" The largest of the trolls yelled to the cook, waving about a broken sword as a knife.

"Shut your cakehole, you'll eat what I'll give ya."

Marie breathed a silent breath of relief. They hadn't spotted her ... yet. She attempted to undo the rope keeping the pen together, but it was too thick for her to undo. She tugged and tugged but the rough texture of the rope started to burn her hands.

Just as she was about to give up, she spotted the very thing she need. A knife. But it was attached to the belt of the slimmer troll with the runny nose.

'Well then, let's see if I'm as effective with trolls as I am with dwarves.' Marie crouched down on all fours and slowly inched herself towards the troll, while trying not to be sick from all the waste and half chewed bones she felt under her hands and feet.

The slimmer troll's hand stretched out in her direction and for a minute Marie thought she was done for, but the hand was blindly searching for a mug of sorts. She remained still, waiting for it to be safe again.

"Oy, that's my grog." The cook hit the troll with his spoon so hard, the troll toppled over and Maire was face to face with it.
'Don't open your eyes, don't open your eyes, don't open your eyes.'

By some miracle, the troll had kept his eyes closed as he pushed himself back up and neither of the others had seen the hobbit.

'Kili was right, they are slow.'

"Oh that is beautifully balanced that is." The cook tasted his concoction, "Here," He shoved the spoon at the slimmer troll, who gladly slurped it down noisily. Marie took the opportunity to make a dash at the knife, but stopped. She had to be extra cautious and need to be slow to pull this off, but she felt a rush of fear and excitement, the same feeling she used to get when hiding from the farmers.

Once she steadied herself, she examined a possible way to slip the knife out. 'Maybe if I just ... no that won't work. Perhaps if I pull it up ...'

While she formulated a plan, the trolls were getting hungrier and hungrier. "My guts are grumbling. I've got to snuffle something."

'Alright then, I got thiiissaaaAAW!"

Unfortunately, the troll decided to sneeze at that moment and reached around for his handkerchief, which Marie was stand right in front of. The troll grabbed both the cloth and Marie and covered the two in green slimy snot. When the troll pulled them away from his face, he got quite the surprise.

"Bert! Look what's come out of me hoota! It's got arms and legs and everything!"

The three trolls stared down at the hobbit, who was too shocked and disgusted to be worried that she had been discovered. The troll threw her to the ground which brought her back to her senses and she thought it best to run, but the largest troll threatened her with his own blade.

"What are you then? An over sized squirrel?"

"nnnNo I'm a burgglllaarrhobbit." Marie's tongue was in a knot.

By now all three trolls realized that she was something edible and their hunger took over. "A burglarhobbit? Can we cook it?"

"We can try."

"Grab it!"

Each on tried to catch her, but each attempt was sloppy and Marie was able to dodge their hands. But the years had taken their toll and Marie was not as fast as she once was. She slipped on a bones and fell face first into the dirt, allowing one of the trolls to grab her leg. He dangled her like a doll high above the ground and prodded her with the tip of his knife.

"Here, are there anymore of you hiding where you shouldn't be?"

Marie shook her head, her face flushed with all the blood rushing to her head. "No, I'm alone."

"It's lying." The troll with a cold sneered, "Hold its toes over the fire. Make it squeal like a pig."

"Wait please!"

But it was the troll that squealed. Kili jumped from his hiding place and slashed at his leg,
unleashing a fierce battle cry as he did.

"Drop her!"

The trolls looked a little dumbfounded, "You what?"

"I said, drop her." Kili's cockiness was in full view now, and Marie was sure he was going to get pulverized by the three troll.

The one holding her let out a growl and tossed her at the dwarf, knocking him clean off his feet. Once Marie was out of the way, that's when the rest of the dwarves made their move. Thorin led the charge and the other eleven ran at the trolls, aiming for their legs and stomachs. Kili joined in once he had pulled Marie away from the fight.

It was here that Marie witnessed the fighting capabilities of each individual dwarf. Some used only brute force and large war hammers to fight, others used their size and stealth to outwit the trolls. Kili, Fili and Thorin proved to be the master swordsmen of the company. Marie saw all this mayhem as another chance to free the ponies. Finding the troll's disregarded knife, Marie ran through the fight unnoticed and thankfully unscathed and began slicing the rope of the pen. The ponies were all frightened and desperate to flee, and gladly did so when Marie cut the rope in two.

"Come one, go. Move." She urged the four beasts away from the fight, totally unaware that she had been spotted until a thick hand wrapped around her.

"That's enough!" The large troll bellowed and brought the fight to an end, holding Marie up with his reclaimed knife pointed at her throat.

"Marie!" Kili screamed, but was held back by Thorin. One by one the dwarves stopped and backed away.

"Lay down your arms, or I slice this one open." He pressed rusted metal harder into her jugular, drawing blood. Thorin saw no choice but to surrender. He thrust his dwarvish sword into the ground and the others followed suit.

The troll dropped Marie into the group unceremoniously and rounded the company up. While being herded, Thorin kept his head down in shame. Not because they had lost, but because a very small part of him was actually willing to chance Marie's life for the sake of winning the battle. That is until he saw the look in her eyes. It was not the fear or the pain he saw, but the simple message in them that moved him.

The simple message 'I'm sorry.'

~*~

"Don't bother cooking them, let's just sit on them, turn them into jelly."

"They should be sautéed and grilled with a sprinkling of sage."

"Oh, that does sound quite nice."

This did not look good for the company. Half were stripped to the undergarments and tied to a log
that rotated over a rekindled fire by two of the trolls while the rest lay helpless in hemp bags, piled up on top of one another unable to stand. Marie tried kicking the bag off her, since all their hands had been bound. They had to get out of the mess somehow.

"Never mind the seasoning, it'll be dawn soon and I don't fancy being turned to stone."

The trolls had unwittingly given Marie the answer she needed. The sky was already a little brighter, so all she needed was to stall them just a little longer.

"Wait! I'm afraid you're making a very bad mistake!" She shouted. The trolls turned around and stared down at the wriggling hobbit as she tried to stand up.

"You can't reason with them Miss Marie, they're halfwits!" Dori cried from the turning spite.

"Halfwits? What does that make us?" Bofur added.

Marie ignored them for a moment and went on with her plan. "What I meant was your choice of seasoning."

The cook stopped turning the spite and crouched down, "What about the seasoning?" He said, his vulgar breath making Marie's eyes water a little.

"Well these dwarves have been traveling for weeks. And I can safely say that none of them have bathed in that time, I mean have you smelt them. Sage is not going to do the trick."

The dwarves took great offense to Marie's statement, not seeing her intentions.

"What do you know about cooking dwarf?" The largest troll growled at Marie but the cook seemed convinced, "Shut up and let the flurbaherbit talk."

'Good, I have their attention ... now what?'

"Thank you, the ah ... proper way to cook these types of dwarves is ... to skin them."

"What?!"

"Traitor!"

Marie cringed at the amount of backlash from the dwarves.

"Tom, get me filleting knife." The troll called to the smallest of the trio. Marie glanced over at the rocks to see if the sun had risen just yet. There was a small hint of red in the sky, but she also spotted Gandalf sneaking through the undergrowth.

He had come back.

'Just a few more minutes.'

"What a load of rubbish. There's nuffing like a bit of raw dwarf." The troll named 'Tom' stomped over to the pile and picked up Bombur, "Nice and crunchy."

The troll liked his lips and dangled Bombur above him, ready to chow down the plump dwarf. Marie panicked and shouted before thinking, "Not him, he's infected!"

That stopped him, "What?"

"Ah yes. He has ... worms ... in his tubes."
Tom dropped Bombur back onto the pile in disgust.

"In fact, if he's infected I wouldn't be surprised if all of them are infected with all sorts of parasites."

For some reason, the dwarves took great offense to this. "We don't have parasites, you have parasites!"

Marie rolled her eyes, *What are you Kili, twelve?*. She looked back at the complaining dwarves and glared at them, hoping that they would at least stop talking. Only Thorin put together what the hobbit was doing. With one swift kick, the dwarves stopped and realized what they were doing wrong.

"I've got parasites as big as my arm." Oin claimed.

"Mine are the biggest parasites, I've got huge parasites!"

"I've got them too!"

"We're riddled!"

It was working. Two of the trolls bought the parasite lie and stared at the dwarves disgusted. But the largest one was still skeptical. "What would you have us do then? Let them all go?" He pushed the cook away and stood imposingly over Marie.

"I never said that. There are ways that you can get rid of the infection, but it's a very tricky task. Boiling works best, but you have to make sure that the temperature is just right. Also the older the dwarf the less time you have to leave it in the pot, but still you need to account for how badly they're infected. Do you have any Rosemary? Not only does it help get rid of parasites it brings out a sweeter flavour. If not Mint would work too, with a little bit of sugar."

The troll just stared, completely stumped. Even the dwarves were surprised to hear so much come out of Marie at once.

However the troll became frustrated and sneered his yellow teeth at Marie, "Shut you face." He flicked his hand and sent Marie into a rock, winding her badly. "The little ferret is taking us for fools."

"The Dawn will take you!"

A tall figure appeared on the boulder above the troll camp, raising his staff over his head.

"Who's that?"

"No idea."

"Can we eat him too?"

The staff came down hard and cracked the boulder in two, sunlight pouring into the camp. Marie watching in amazement at the tough skin of the trolls cracked and turned to stone, their bodies groaning as they shielded their eyes from the light before completely freezing them where they stood.

The dwarves cheered out of sheer happiness that they didn't end up as jelly or boiled stew.

Even Thorin smiled a very rare smile. Gandalf always had excellent timing.
Marie spent the next little while picking dried troll snot off herself as the rest of the company looked for their stolen weapons and clothes. Bombur and Bofur had to force Bifur back into his pants once he was freed from the spit. For the sake of privacy, Marie went and stood behind one of the stone trolls as they did.

"That was an interesting night." Marie said to herself, her finger trapped in a large knot of hair and snot.

"Indeed," Gandalf chuckled and appeared at her side, "I must say I'm glad that your colorful tongue is still as sharp as ever my dear." He patted her head, making Marie shuffle her feet awkwardly, "Didn't think they would buy it, I just said the first few things that came to me."

"I believe that it confused them more than anything." He tapped the troll's head with his staff, "Still, it is easy to confuse a mind with nothing in it."

"Alistair once said that."

Gandalf glanced down at her, noting the woebegone tone of her voice, but before he could question it Thorin strolled over to them. "Where did you go if I may ask?" He asked, hand resting on the hilt of his blade. It looked as though he had not seen Marie standing there, which irked her a little.

"To look ahead." Gandalf answered simply, like their previous argument had not at all passed.

"What brought you back?"

"Looking behind. Nasty business trolls. Still, good to see that you're all in one piece."

It was then Thorin chose to acknowledge the hobbit, "No thanks to your burglar." He tilted his head as he gave her an unfavorable look. Marie pulled her finger out of her hair, not wishing to give him another reason to be ridiculed by him, "It was your nephews who had the bright idea to send me in first instead of warning you."

Gandalf, ever the she hobbit's champion, came forward to her defense. "She had the thought to play for time when none of you did. She may have gotten you into a mess but she did a good job of helping to get you out of it."

But Thorin was only half listening to the wizard. His gaze had dropped from Marie's dirty face to the cut on her neck, where a trail of dried blood traveled down towards her shirt collar. She was lucky that she only had a mere cut, but what of the next time they cross paths with danger? Marie took notice of his stare but misinterpreted the meaning of it, "I'm sorry for causing such a fuss." She turned in a huff and went to join the others.

Thorin just shook his head. 'Women.'

"Since when did Mountain Trolls venture this far south?"

"Not for an age. Not since a darker power ruled these lands." Gandalf lent on his staff and had that far off look in his eyes again. "They could not have moved in daylight, so how ...?"

Thorin looked back behind him, noticing the trail of small animal bones and trampled bushes
heading out of the camp. "There must be a troll cave nearby." He looked over to his men to call them over, but hesitated as he noticed something that, oddly enough, bothered him. Marie had gone straight over to Fili, Kili and Balin, the only ones of his company that she talked to freely, and seemed more relaxed than a mere minute ago. Kili was muttering something of an apology to her, his usually grin replaced with a frown of guilt. Marie uttered a few words and patted his shoulder, instantly changing Kili's expression back to normal.

Thorin needed to suppress this unpleasant feeling brewing in him. "We're moving out!"

~*~

After searching to path, the dwarves and Gandalf came stumbled upon and cave under a large boulder, with the stench of death emanating from it. Marie gagged and backed off a little, as did a few of the others. The entrance of the cave was littered with more remains, but also varies pieces of wagons, furniture and even the odd goblet.

"What on all this good earth is this?" She asked, muffling her mouth with her sleeve.

"A troll horde my dear Marie. Trolls collect anything of value and hide them in underground caves." Gandalf answered briskly, unaffected by the smell as he lowered himself into the cave.

"Bofur, Nori, Gloin, you come with us. Ori you take Bifur and gather up the ponies. The rest of you wait out here." Thorin followed Gandalf's lead and climbed into the darkness, with four reluctant dwarves in tow.

"What did he say?" Oin held his ear trumpet the wrong way and missed the order. "We stay here." Marie said loudly for the old dwarf and stretched out her back, hearing something crack. What she wouldn't give for a decent night's sleep in a proper bed at that moment.

Gandalf and the selected dwarves delved further into the horde, finding at last objects of worth scattered about under thick layers of cobwebs and dust. Piles of gold pieces and small trinkets pooled at Bofur's feet, and he started to feel that dwarvish greed creeping up on him. "Seems a shame just to leave it lying around. Anyone could take it."

"Agreed." Gloin said from across the cave with glee, having found a half empty chest of silver goods, "Nori, get a shovel." The three dwarves hastily hid the now full chest in a hole and covered it in dirt, claiming it as a 'long term deposit'.

Thorin himself was not immune to the dwarvish greed. He found a stash of swords in heart of the cave and pulled two from the pile. Being a blacksmith, he could see fine work in just the hilts of the swords. "These were not made by any troll."

He handed the longer sword to Gandalf and kept the finer blade for himself.

"And not by any smith among men either." Gandalf carefully pulled the sword from hits sheath and inspect the blade, "These were forged by the High Elves of the first Age."

As soon as he heard this, Thorin's opinion of the sword lowered and he thought to put it back into the dust pile. "You could not wish for a finer blade." Gandalf said before he could do so.

Thorin frowned and pulled the blade out to see just how fine it was. It was light and easy to wield,
but still strong enough to withstand a good fight. The balance was perfect, and there was a trace of elvish scripture along the edges. As much as it pained him to even think it, the craftsmanship of the sword was unparalleled and he would be a fool to not take it.

As he fitted the sword across his back, Thorin felt his boot kick something. Judging by the sound it made, it was something metal. He crouched down to brush away the dead leaves and found a small blade with a copper red hilt and charcoal colored sheath. To a normal man this would be no bigger than a dagger, even in Thorin's hands it was too small to wield in war. The blade looked to be of the same elvish make as his new one, in fact their looked remarkably similar.

For some reason the thought of Marie appeared in his head when he held the blade. If she was going to get herself into more trouble in the future, she might as well have some form of protection.

"Gloin, Nori, Bifur, let's move on." Thorin called and headed for the exit. They all left the without hesitation and breathed in the fresh air of the morning to remove the stench from their lungs.

Marie had placed herself well away from the cave and fumbled with the leather strap of her travel bag with an expression of boredom all over her face. Thorin stomped over and held out the small blade, not saying anything. Marie just looked at the dwarf and the blade. Unsure of what to do until Thorin grumbled "Take it," she let him drop it into her outstretched hands.

She looked up and down the foreign tool before remembering her manners, "Um ... thank you Thorin."

But he was already gone when she looked up.

She slowly pulled out the sword to view it herself, marveling at its strange beauty.

"Careful now Marie."

"Honestly Gandalf, do you make a point appearing out of nowhere?" Marie was clutching her heart from shock. The wizard made a noise in his throat that she guessed was a form of a chuckle as he adjusted the long sword around his waist. "That is an elvish blade my dear. It is sharp as it is light, so mind your fingers."

Marie nodded and looked back at the metal, seeing her reflection in it. "Why would Thorin give me this? I told him that I've never used one."

Gandalf glanced over at the dwarf in question from under his large hat. This simple act, regardless of its intentions, was a good step Thorin was making.

"Well, I personally hope that you never have to." Gandalf looked back down at the hobbit, "Just remember, true courage is about knowing not when to take a life, but when to spare one."

Marie processed each word he had said, wondering what he meant by 'true courage'.

"Up ahead!"

"There's something coming!"

Gandalf's ancient face grew tight and he drew his sword with lightening speed, Marie just fumbled about with the hilt and pointed the small sword in front of her knowing for sure that she was holding in the right direction. The rest of the company readier their own strange weapons as the sound of rustling became louder, along with "Murder!"
Out of the thicket came a sled made of only slim branches and worn out twin, pulled by ten rabbits. The driver was a small man in layers of rags, furs and other various materials. His long brown beard blended into his cloths, and an odd shaped hat of brown felt sat atop and extremely filthy head. His eyes darted around wildly, almost ferrel like. Gandalf was the only one who knew who this person was.

"Radagast." He sighed and sheathed his blade. The dwarves all looked at each other and lowered their weapons.

'This is a wizard?' Marie cocked her head and stared at the strange fellow, not aware that she was still pointing her new sword at him. She only became aware when Thorin's sturdy came crashing down on her hand.

"Put that away before you hurt yourself."

Marie would have, but as Thorin was watching the two wizards he kept his hand on her's, preventing her from letting go. Marie was sure that he wasn't doing it intentionally.

"What on earth are you doing here?" Gandalf approached the startled wizard.

"I was looking for you Gandalf," Radagast was breathing heavily, "There's something terrible wrong."
The Prey and the Hunted

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Apparently, the matter that Radagast needed to discuss with Gandalf so urgently was not of any of the dwarves' concern or that of Marie's. Thus the company was reduced to wait until the two wizards were finished before they continue on their way.

Thorin paced irritably at this further set back.

Bofur sat beside Marie on a small boulder as he sharpened the end of his large mattock weapon, humming a merry old tune as he worked, while in front of them the company splintered off into different groups to speak of mostly trivial things.

"The Greenwood is sick, Gandalf. A darkness has fallen over it." Radagast said quickly, his voice small and weasel like to Marie's ears. She didn't mean to eavesdrop since it was very rude, but her curiosity had gotten the better of her. This Radagast fellow was so odd to her, and yet she found his quirky behaviour strangely relatable. She strained her hearing from her spot, just a little ways from the conversing wizards and pretending to be examining the sheath her new blade.

"Nothing grows anymore, at least nothing good. The air is fouled decay, but worst are the webs."

"Webs? What do you mean?" Gandalf pulled his pipe from his mouth and gazed the Brown wizard a questioning look.

"Spiders, Gandalf. Giant ones."

Marie shivered and decided to turn out of their talk if was going to be about spiders. She instead gave her full attention to Bofur's mattock, both scared and curious about the strange weapon. Bofur noticed her observation and held up the weapon, "I take it that you're not familiar with a mattock Miss Marie?" He asked.

"No, in fact I wasn't aware that half of these weapons even existed." She said, glancing around at the various tools of war the dwarves carried in their hands or across their backs.

"One of our many specialties. Unlike most, our weapons are made to withstand the test of time and brunt of a battle. A blacksmith takes pride in every one of his creations."

"And are you a blacksmith?"

"No, just a humble toy maker." He said with his signature grin. While Marie didn't think to place him as a toymaker when they had met, she could defiantly picture him working at a bench with his carefree attitude and a half finished toy in hand.

"But, if you are a toy maker, why would you need a weapon such as this?" She tapped he old iron of the mattock with her index finger.

"One can never be too cautious when facing a dragon."

Before Marie could manage a courteous smile in agreement, a terrible howling filled the air. Everyone was set on edge and all but Marie reached for their weapons. "Was that a wolf?"
"No, that is not a wolf." Bofur held his mattock up in a defensive pose.

"Above!" Gloin cried and Marie swung round to see a mass of ragged brown and black fur and a very very big mouth filled with teeth appear over the rock face and leap down at the company. Bofur pulled Marie out of the monster's path, allowing Thorin a clean shot at it. He buried his new elvish blade deep into the monster's neck, killing it instantly. Another one appeared behind Thorin, but was quickly shot down by Kili. Dwalin crushed its head as it fell just to be sure.

Both creatures looked like emaciated wolves only they were as large as a pony, hides covered in scars.

Marie felt her knees knocking together as Gandalf and Radagast joined them. Thorin pulled his blade out of the carcass and grunted, "Warg scouts." Once his blade was free he stepped away from the creature with distain, "Which means an Orc pack is not far behind."

Marie saw fire in his eyes. The kind of fire that was fueled by an old hate, anticipation of a fight and something almost wild.

"Who did you tell about you quest, beyond your kin?" Gandalf's voice was grave and serious.

"No one."

"Who did you tell!?"

"No one, I swear."

But still Gandalf was acting more hyper vigilant than usual, his grey eyes darting around the area. "What in Durin's name is going on?" Thorin growled.

'That's what I'd like to know.' Marie thought and clutched her sheathed sword tightly.

"You are being hunted." The wizard finally answer. "We have to get out of here, and fast." Dwalin said.

"We can't!" Ori and Bifur came running over the rocks. "We have no ponies, they've bolted." Ori said crestfallen. Marie internally groaned.

"I'll draw them off." Came the surprisingly confident voice of Radagast. Marie looked up at the odd wizard, and saw that he had suddenly changed from quirky to 'Gandalf' like serious. Gandalf himself just shook his head at his fellow wizard.

"These are Gundabad wargs. They will outrun you."

"These are Rhosgobel rabbits. I'd like to see them try."

Needless to say, even Marie had to take him seriously with that tone of voice.

"Right. Take all that can be carried, leave the rest. We must move quickly." Thorin said and the dwarves jumped into action. "Just give me five minutes to get their attention before you do." Radagast said as he ran swiftly over to his sled, with his rabbits ready for him.

"Good luck my friend." Gandalf cried just as the wooden sled took off.

"Will he be alright?" Marie asked quietly as she slipped on her travel pack and sword, concerned for the small man. "I don't know, but we have to move Marie." Kili grabbed her pack and pulled her along. "Hold on a minute." She protest, "How do you get this blasted thing on?" She struggle
with the sword's belt and fumbled around with the strips of leather.

"Here." Kili turned her around and proceeded to help her.

"Thank you Kili." She said grateful for the help, and somewhat ignorant of him leaving barely any room between them as he did.

"Kili!"

Both the dwarf and the hobbit look ahead to the owner of the voice, Thorin. "I want you and Fili on point." He ordered. Kili complied and run up to the head of the group while his uncle glared at the back of his head. Marie sped up her pace until she came along side Gandalf.

"Stay close to me Marie." He muttered. The company moved with care as they neared the end of the forest and were left exposed on a rocky valley. Packed behind one large rock, they waited until Gandalf gave the single to move. He poked his head out and watched as the large orc pack chased after Radagast.

"Move now." He said and the company began running. The terrain proved tricky to run on, but the thought of the wargs not far behind was all the incentive one needed to keep running. That is until they spotted Radagast rush by barely half a mile in front of them, with the pack hot on his tail.

"Move, move." Thorin turned them around and they head back. Marie run at the head of the group and kept up a reasonable pace. She may not have had the speed she once possessed but she still had stamina, which was more that could be said about the dwarves who were slowing down.

"This way!" Gandalf shepherded them around the rocks when they spotted Radagast again, closer this time. Thorin grew suspicious of where exactly the wizard was leading them, while the rest followed blindly.

As they rounded the rocks, Fili stared frantically waving his hand, "Warg rider." He hissed.

They all pressed into the rock face as a lone rider that had splinted off from the pack climbed up onto of the rock, the warg and the orc both sniffing the air. Marie felt her heart rise up in her throat, half choking her with anxiety. Thorin, who was standing to her left looked over at Kili and nodded to him. The young dwarf quietly unsheathed an arrow and cocked his bow. He took a deep breath and moved away from the rock to take aim. This exposed him to the enemy just long enough to get a good shot at the warg's neck. It choked violently and both creatures tumbled down in front of the waiting dwarves.

Marie gasped as she caught her first glimpse of an orc. It had a humanoid form, but its face was so badly disfigured and black flesh bulged like a plague over its body and shone with sweat and slime. It made such a terrible howling as the dwarves hacked at it and its steed, its screeching voice cut right through her. She covered her ears and grimaced at the sound of clashing steal and flesh.

"Hurry, hurry." Gandalf urged them to keep moving, for the rest of the pack had heard the cries of their fallen comrade, and knew where they were hiding. Marie did not hesitate and gladly ran. It didn't bother her that her feet and legs were being cut on sharp torn bushes that covered the ground, for an adrenaline rush filled her again, moving her tiny legs underneath her without registering the pain.

"There they are!"

Marie skidded to a halt as she saw several wargs in front of them. The orc pack was closing in, circling them. This was no ordinary pack, it was too large, too organized. Gandalf was right, they
were hunting them. But for what reason?
"They're coming!"

Kili tried to keep the wargs at bay with his arrows, but there were too many. They would have no choice but to fight. Marie pulled out her sword and to her utmost surprise, it was glowing. The silver metal of the elvish handiwork had turned a blinding blue.

'How is it ...? Why?'

Marie shook her head and told herself to concentrate of the problem at hand. Her heart pounded hard in her ribcage to the point where every beat felt like a punch, but still she held up her sword and prepared for the worst to come.

"Where is Gandalf?" Bofur cried out.

Marie looked all around her but could not see the grey wizard. He was just there at her side a mere second ago. "He had abandoned us." Dwalin shout in frustration as the pack closed in even further.

'Impossible. Gandalf would not leave us at a time like this ... would he?'

Chapter End Notes

Yes this is a very small chapter. sorry guys.
"Where is Gandalf?"

"He has abandoned us!"

'Impossible. Gandalf would not leave us at a time like this ... would he?'

"Over here! Quickly!"

Marie felt a brief sense of relief as she heard Gandalf's voice, but where did it come from? Marie looked all around until she spotted the point of his large hat rise up from behind a boulder. "In here!" Gandalf disappeared again. There must have been a hole in the rock, which meant a possible escape. Taking no chances, the dwarves and Marie made for the hole.

Bifur, Bombur and Nori were the first to climb into the hole, which was actually the opening to a cavern large enough for Gandalf to stand up in. Dori and Ori tumbled in together and were followed by Balin, Bofur and Fili.

"Quickly!" Thorin yelled at the remaining companions as he stood by the hole ready to fend off any attacks, holding both his elvish blade and battle axe firmly in his hands. Gloin and Oin reached the hole together, Dwalin and Marie close behind.

"Move lass!" Dwalin pushed her in first.

"Kili!" Thorin shouted for his nephew, who was lingering above to shoot at the orcs. He only pulled back when his supply of arrows was extremely low. Thorin and Kili slid down into the throng of dwarves packed tightly together. Marie had squeezed her way over to Gandalf and clutched at his robe. Her glowing sword visibly shaking as she held it up weakly.

The snarls and incoherent voices of the orcs drew closer to the opening but were over shadowed by the sound of a horn blaring in the distance, accompanied by a horse's whinny and the hiss of arrows flying. The dwarves looked at one another with confusion and surprise as a small battle raged above.

There was a horrible screech and a black body fell into the hole with an arrow in its chest. The dwarves parted as the carcass hit the clod stone floor, black blood pooling around it. Once it had ceased to breathe Thorin pulled out the arrow and inspected the blood soaked tip. "Elves." He snarled and tossed the arrow aside.

"What now?" Dori piped up from the back, "Do we go back up?"

"Wait." Dwalin moved Dori aside and found a narrow opening at the back of the cavern. "I can't see where the path leads. Do we follow it or not?" Dwalin shouted as he inspected it.

"Follow it of course!" Bofur answered and pushed his brother along. A collective grunt of agreement echoed in the cavern, even Gandalf nodded. "I think that would be best." He muttered.

Marie had not heard any of what the dwarves of Gandalf had said, for all she could focus on was the black corpse at her feet. It made her feel queasy and yet she could not look away, not even as the blood reached her toes. The reality of what had happened so far was catching up to her, and she was coming down from an adrenaline rush.
"Marie?"

Gandalf's old hand rested on her small shoulder in much needed support.

"I'm ... alright." She muttered. When she could finally move her eyes again, they looked to her sword first. It was no longer glowing.

"Come along. I think you'll enjoy this." Gandalf stirred her around and towards the pathway.

"What do you mean?"

"Wait and you will see."

Marie did not question him and just sheathed her sword.

The path twisted and grew narrower but it was still large enough for each dwarf to pass through, though Bombur did require assistance on the odd corner. Marie looked up above her head and saw the sky lighting their way, letting her hand slide along the rocks. The gentle grazing of skin and granite was therapeutic and calmed her down.

'It looks like the inside of a mountain. But weren't we underground before? Did Gandalf know ... What the ...?'

Marie pulled her hand away from the wall in shock. Water was trickling from a tiny faucet carved by nature in the side of the rocks. It flowed into a tiny stream that ran all the way to the edge of the path, which curved out into the open and along the side of the mountain. Marie looked down at the valley bellow with utter awe across her face. Hidden within lush green trees stood an elvish city, stretching up along the mountain side with its various halls and towers, with a great waterfall bring fresh water into its heart. The low light of the sun peeking out from behind the mountain created a gentle glow in the valley.

"The Valley of Imladris." Gandalf said, coming up from behind Marie, "In the common tongue it is known by another name."

"Rivendell." Marie breathed. She had read many tales that had mentioned it, and had stared at countless pictures that had tried to depict it, but never had she thought that she would even see the fabled city with her own eyes. Some of the younger dwarves were entranced by this secret haven, though only a little.

"The Last Homely House east to the sea." Gandalf lent on his staff and grinned with a tad satisfaction. This did not go unnoticed by the dwarf king.

"This was your plan all along, to seek refuge with our enemy?" He walked up to the wizard and slammed the hilt of his battle axe hard into the ground, breaking Marie's daze.

"You have no enemies here, Thorin Oakenshield. The only ill will to be found in this valley is that which you bring yourself." Gandalf tried to calm Thorin's rising temper before it got out of hand.

"You think the Elves will give our quest their blessing? They will try to stop us."

"Of course they will. But we have questions that need to be answered."

Marie watched Thorin's face fall with skepticism. As far as she could tell, Thorin would do anything to reclaim the Lonely Mountain, but whether or not his pride would allow him to seek help here was still a mystery.
Gandalf adjusted his grip on his staff and spoke in a more light hearted tone. "If we are to be successful this will need to be handled with tact and respect, and no small degree of charm, which is why you will leave the talking to me."

The look Thorin gave him was like that of a child being told to off and forced to apologize, causing Marie to hide her grin behind her hand.

"Come along now. The sooner we make introductions, the sooner we may all find rest from this day." Gandalf picked up the folds of his cloak and parted the company to take the lead.

"Indeed." Marie sighed and took a step after Gandalf, but faltered as she passed Thorin. She looked up and found the dwarf staring down at her. "You could ... I don't know ... lighten up a little." Her attempt at joking with him fell flatter than a coin.

His bright eyes just continued to look down at her until she scampered away after Gandalf.

The trek down the side of the mountain into the valley was unnecessarily long, but worth it for the spectacular sight before them. Marie found herself slipping further back in the line as she kept stopping just to stare at Rivendell. The crossed over a stone carved bridge and found themselves in an open pavilion that lay at just outside the city. The tall perfectly carve statues held Marie's attention while her companions looked about with caution, like the enemy would burst out and cut them down.

"Mithrandir."

The company turned to face the newcomer descend the stairs to greet them, and Marie finally got her first glance at an elf. The elf was a tall, graceful being in along purple tunic with long dark hair held back by a circlet. His face was angled like a cat and looked as smooth as porcelain. This was not what Marie had expected. She had always imagined Elves to be more ... faerie like, for lack of a better word, but this one look more human. As he approached Gandalf, he bowed his head and held his hand out in a welcoming fashion, as he did Marie spotted the telltale pointed ears.

Gandalf repeated the action to the elf, "I must speak with Lord Elrond."

The elf's dark eyebrows rose ever so slightly at the request, "My Lord Elrond is not here." He answered curtly.

"Where is he?" Gandalf asked.

Before the elf could answer, the sound of a horn filled the valley. It was the same as the horn they had heard before. Marie turned and saw a large party on horseback riding towards them.

'More elves?' She thought carelessly, unaware that she was right in the middle of their path.

Immediately the dwarves readied for a fight. "Circle up!" Thorin shouted and they packed together tightly, weapons out. "Maire, get back." Bofur pulled her into the centre, where Fili and Kili stood either side of her. The host of Elves in copper red armor rode into the pavilion and circled the company on their proud stallions, many of them carrying long banners. Marie felt a little claustrophobic with all the dwarves surrounding her. The elves slowed their horses and looked down at them with blank expressions on their perfect faces.

"Gandalf." The leader called to the wizard with a smile. He himself carried signs of age, such as deep set lines across his brow and the corners of his mouth. Marie guessed that he was an elf of a great age and importance, and she was right.
"Lord Elrond, Mellon-nin." Gandalf bowed to the Lord of Rivendell and uttered something in the elvish tongue. Elrond responded in the same manner as he dismounted his black steed. He strode over to the wizard and the two shared a firm embrace as old friends. Marie stood on her tippy toes to peer around Fili's head to see better, catching a glimpse of a poorly made weapon of rusted steel and bone in Elrond's hand. "Strange for orcs to come so close to out border. Something or someone has drawn them near." He handed the sword to the elf that had greeted them.

"That would be us." Gandalf admitted. Elrond turned to the dwarves as Thorin stepped forward.

"Welcome Thorin, son of Thrain." Elrond said.

"I do not believe we have met." Thorin's voice was cold and detached with his response, his hands that were resting on his battle axe clenched slowly.

"You have your grandfather's bearing. I knew Thror when he ruled Under the Mountain."

"Really? He made no mention of you."

Marie had not known Thorin for very long, and had no clue as to why he was so resentful of the Elves in the first place, but she did know for a fact that he was being quite rude to the Elf Lord. Elrond did not appear to be offended by Thorin's poor conduct in manners and said something in his native tongue. The difference between the two languages was more apparent to Marie now that she had heard both. While the dwarvish tongue was more gravely and rough to hear, the elvish sounded more gentle, like it was rolling off the tongue.

Only Marie took the time to appreciate it, while Gloin interpreted it as a threat. "What is he saying? Does he offer us insult?!" He bared his teeth at the elf, others too growled.

"No Master Gloin." Gandalf shook his head and grinned slightly, "He is offering you food."

If there was one thing that Marie could say about the dwarves, it was that they never turn down a meal.

~*~

Not only did Elrond offer the company a place at his table, but a roof and warm bed for the night. Dinner was an interesting event, seeing is how the elvish diet did not consist of any meat. The dwarves were a little on edge and in dismay at such a thing, but Marie found the meal delightful compared to weeks of gruel and burnt meat. Marie reveled in the world surrounding her and took in every detail. From the music she heard from far off to the shape of the trees, nothing escaped her gaze. The dwarves retired early to their shared room in a vain attempt to escape what Dwalin called the 'saccharin sweet company of the pointed ears'. But Marie had a taste for exploring, fueled by the energy she felt when she stepped foot into Rivendell.

Her first port of call was the large study where they had had dinner. Marie wondered aimlessly from shelf to shelf, daring herself from time to time to remove a book. They were of course written in elvish, but Marie could still admire it. In one book she thought that she saw a rendering of the Shire. A table was set in the far corner of the study, but could barely be seen from under all the parchments and quills that cover its surface. She found herself climbing a set of stairs leading up to the second floor but there were no book or parchments.
There was a lone statue of grey stone placed across from a painted mural. The statue was of a woman holding out a stone tablet with a piece of cloth, but Maire could not see what else. She looked across at the mural and examined it. It was a depiction of a battle, men and elves fighting against horde of orcs and other unsightly creatures. At the centre of the painting, Marie saw a mortal man in silver armor hold up a broken sword against a black figure, surrounded in darkness. While its body looked to be made of smoke and shadow, its helmet was solid and intimidating, as was the weapon it was baring down on the man.

On its finger, Marie thought she could see a sliver of gold ... like a ring.

She was focusing so hard on the picture that she did not hear the approach of her gracious host.

"I' lanta en' i' Mori Heru." Elrond said in a clear voice so as not to scare the hobbit. "The Great Battle of the Last Alliance."

Marie looked up the tall elf, now dressed in a golden robe, as he looked at the picture with a hint of reminiscences in his blue eyes.

"History?" She asked politely, to which Elrond smiled and nodded. "Yes, history that has become but a fleeting memory in the hearts of many." He passed by Marie and walked towards an open balcony at the end of the floor. "Tell me Miss Baggins, how do you like Imladris?"

Marie scurried after the elf until she walked in step with him, "I am enjoying it very much."

"I am glad to hear that. It was been an age since I seen a Halfling this far east of Arthedain."

"Blame it on either a wizard of my spontaneous decision for an adventure."

Elrond's chuckle emanated deep in his chest and rest his hands on the banister. They stood and looked down at the gardens bellow. The setting sun turned everything bronze and gold, making it seem as though it was crafted by hand. Again Marie felt very small.

"I know it is a little late, but I would like to thank you for allowing us to stay here." Marie turned and bowed her head to Elrond.

"It is quite alright Miss Baggins. Rivendell is a place of refuge for those seeking it. I do not make it a habit to turn away those in need so long as their purpose does not threaten my people."

Marie bit the inside of her cheek, Elrond had not been informed of the nature of their travels for the time being and Marie did not wish to be the one with the loose tongue.

"This a place of healing, one of the few remaining places for such things left in this world." Elrond went on.

"I could feel a great energy as I entered here." Marie nodded, "Like a wave of peace."

Elrond looked down at the hobbit, "That energy is felt by those in need of healing."

"But I'm not sick nor am I injured."

"No, but something may be broken."

Marie looked away from the elf and tightened her lips.

Elrond saw the discomfort in her and said nothing more on the matter. "You carry an elvish blade?" He said when he spotted the small thing attached to her hip. Marie straightened up and
noded. "Thorin found it and gave it to me, though I can not fathom why."

"It was with Orcrist and Glamdring?"

Marie shrugged. "I guess."

"May I?" Elrond held out a hand. Marie pulled the sword out and carefully handed it to him.

It looked tiny in his hands, just slightly bigger than a normal dagger. "Indeed, this is from
Gondolin. Made by the same hand that forged Orcrist, perhaps as a partner." He ran his thumb
along the tiny inscription on the blade, "There is an enchantment on the steel. It will glow in the
presence of Orcs and Goblins."

'An early warning. I like that.' Marie thought. Elrond passed the sword back to Marie, "May it
serve you well in the future."

"I think I'd be too afraid to use it." She muttered.

"Or wise Miss Baggins. The one who chooses the path of peace hold the same amount, if not more
courage to do so than the one who walks the path of a warrior." Elrond said.

"Well, I don't know about that." Marie scoffed to herself.

'My courage left me long ago.'
“So are we to ask for Lord Elrond’s assistance or not Thorin?” Balin asked as he and Thorin trudged through Rivendell. Night had fallen over the world and the ethereal lights of the elven city, though beautiful, made both veterans uneasy.

“If he means to stand in our way, no.” Thorin hooked his thumbs into his steel belt, his fur coat had been left behind since the night air was so warm. A waterfall raged under their feet as the crossed over one of the many bridges, and a gentle mist dotted their ruddy faces with water. Balin squinted his old eyes and gave a quiet grunt of annoyance, Thorin just looked ahead and ignored it.

The only reason they were out was because of Gandalf’s request. He had asked that Thorin bring the map to Elrond study where the elf may be able to decode whatever secrets it may hold.

Thorin did not like this at all, having to turn to an elf for assistance. He only brought Balin for this meeting, leaving the rest of the company in their rooms. He had not seen where Marie had run off to after dinner, knowing her she was bound to land herself in trouble once more. The wide eyed look on her face at dinner was a clear sign that she would just love to explore every inch of the place. As silly as Thorin found that, there was something about it that made her look more vibrant than usual.

He had only glanced out of the corner of his eye to see her, so it must have been nothing more than a trick of the light.

Gandalf was waiting for them on the other side of the bridge, tapping the end of his staff on the smooth floor in a manner that suggested inpatients.

“Ah Thorin,” The wizards stopped his tapping and straightened up, "Finally. It is not becoming to keep our host waiting."

Thorin resisted the urge to roll his eyes.

Gandalf indicated with his staff for them to move on. The study was light only by moonlight and tiny candles lined against the wall. Elrond was standing in the centre looking down and speaking with none other than the hobbit herself, looking even smaller next to the elf. Her back was towards them as they came closer, but it was clear that she was talking with confidence to Elrond.

"There you are Marie," Gandalf said, "I was wondering where you had gone off." Marie turned to look at the three of them and stepped to the side. Thorin saw a trace of a smile before it faded.

The elf looked up and nodded to them, stepping forward to meet them halfway, "Gandalf, here already." His lips formed a half smile as he tilted his head back at Marie, "Miss Baggins makes for such excellent company, I was not aware of the time that had passed so quickly."

"Like her dear mother, always one for stories." Gandalf puffed out his chest, as if he was pleased that Elrond approved of his burglar.

"Indeed." Elrond turned his attention to Balin. "We have not been formally introduced."

"Balin, son of Fundin, at your service."

While they briefly exchanged formalities, Thorin took this chance to subtly make his way over to Marie and gripped her shoulder with his large hand. She was startled by this, but did not struggle
under his hold.

"What has he asked about our quest?" He murmured quickly.

"Nothing." Marie shook her head, stray tendrils of hair pulling free from her braid.

"Are you sure? He may have tricked any information out of you."

"Positive. I am not as stupid as you imagine me to be."

Thorin was taken aback by her words. He had never thought her stupid, only ... useless to a degree.

"Please, you're going to leave a bruise." Marie retched up to pry away his fingers that dug into her shoulder. Again Thorin felt the warmth between their hands. Unlike the last time, he was not so hasty in removing his hand, his fingers lingering along hers for a second ... or two.

"Gandalf tells me that you have a certain map in old dwarvish." As Elrond turned back around, Thorin and Marie both took a step away from one another. "Our business is of no concern to the elves." He hooked his thumbs once more into his belt, standing confidently before the elf.

"Oh for goodness sake Thorin, show him the map" Gandalf shook his head and lent heavily on his staff.

"It is the legacy of my people. It is mine to protect as are its secrets." Balin nodded in agreement with Thorin and joined him at his side. Marie just stood awkwardly on his other side, clearly not wanting to be quite in the middle of a brewing argument.

"Save me from the stubbornness of dwarves. Your pride will be your downfall Thorin Oakensheild." Gandalf said exasperatingly. The elf had stood in silence as Gandalf grumbled away, not showing any anger at Thorin's distrust in him. This nonchalant attitude was one of the many things that Thorin hated about elves. He remembered when Erebor was taken how the Elven King had stared down at him, void of any emotion as he watched the dwarves run for their lives. Yet Elrond's was different, more gentle. Perhaps he could be trusted, but only a little.

"You stand in the presence of one of the few in Middle Earth that can read that map. Show it to Lord Elrond."

Thorin weighed their options carefully. If he did show him the map the elf would immediately suspect their intentions, but still, they would be one step closer to their goal.

They could always fight their way out of Rivendell should the elves stand in their way.

With a frown on his face, he grudgingly retched into his pocket and pulled out the folded map. Balin looked slightly mortified that Thorin was giving in to the wizard's demand, but Thorin held up a hand to keep him at by while passing the map to Elrond.

The Elven Lord unfurled the old parchment and scanned its contents with a careful eye. "Erebor." He breathed, "What is your interest in this map." Thorin detected suspicion in his voice, but Gandalf was quick to put it to rest. "It's mainly academic. As you know these sorts of things may have hidden texts."

Elrond turned to way as he continued to examine the map, allowing Gandalf to give the dwarf a side glance, telling him to not to say anything for now. A soft growl emanated from the back of his throat as he stepped back. Elrond looked to the moon and held the map up, allowing the light to hit the parchment. It appeared he had found something, for he began to mutter something in elvish.

Gandalf thankfully interpreted him. "Moon Runes. Such an easy thing to miss."
Thorin nodded. Moon Runes were rarely used in this age so it would make sense that Thror would encode the map with them. Against his better judgement, he glanced to his side to see the burglar's reaction. She happened to be standing in the path of light which brightened up her eyes. They looked like two pale emeralds shining as the moonlight was captured in their depths, taking in everything. There was that spark again. They flickered across to him but Thorin just looked away. He had no time for such nonsense.

"Yes. Moon Runes can only be seen under the light of a moon of the same shape and season as the day they were written." The elf turned to face them with a confident smile on his face.

"Can you read them?" Thorin asked hopefully. Elrond nodded and tilted his head towards the doorway. "Walk with me."

Just as the elf took off, Gandalf turned and said to Marie, "It would be for the best if you come too my dear."

The four of them followed the elf to an opening in the mountain where a tall flight of stairs brought them to a platform carved from the rocks, the sound of the waterfalls surrounding them was amplified by the concave hollow, along with the sound of Marie's puffing from the steep climb. At the edge of the platform there was a large crystal, about as wide as a shield with a flat surface. Elrond walked to it and placed the map on its glittering surface, joined by Gandalf and Thorin. Balin and Marie stood a few feet away as to avoiding crowding them.

"These runes were written by the light of a crescent moon on a Midsummer's Eve nearly two hundred years ago." He said his long fingers tracing the blank space on the map were the text must have been, "Fate must be smiling upon you Thorin Oakenshield. The same moon shines on us tonight."

Thorin looked up in time to see clouds pull back and reveal the crescent moon. Perhaps Fate did have a hand in this, or it was just coincidence that the wizard had led them to Rivendell in time.

The moon's rays caught the side of the large crystal and it began to glow white. The light pierced the parchment and a small passage of silver runes appeared. Thorin leaned in with hungry eyes at the glowing text.

"Stand by the Grey stone when the Thrush knocks, and the setting sun with the last light of Durin's Day shall shine upon the Keyhole." Elrond read aloud.

A riddle, how fitting. This new clue filled Thorin with both hope and fear. He crossed his arms and thought over it. "This is ill news. Summer is passing and Durin's Day is almost upon us."

"We still have time to find the entrance." Balin said reassuringly and stepped into the light. "We must be standing on the right spot at exactly the right time then and only then can the door be open."

"So this is your purpose? To enter the mountain?" Both Balin and Thorin had been so focused on the riddle they did not realize that they had completely given away they quest.

"What of it?" Thorin said, returning to his hostile tone.

"There are some who would not deem it wise."

Thorin snatched back the map from the Elrond. It had been in his hands long enough as far as Thorin was concerned.
"Do not forget Gandalf. You are not the only Guardian to stand watched over Middle Earth."
Elrond said to the wizard. He picked up the trim of his long robe and left the four of them alone on
the platform.

"Oh dear." Gandalf muttered into his beard, "This may be more complicated than planned."

"Umm I don't mean to sound naggy," The three men directed their attentions to Marie as she spoke
up for the first time, "But when and what exactly is this 'Durin's Day'?" Marie's face contorted with
confusion. Thorin thought it was quite amusing how little she knew about the world. Balin took the
responsibility of explaining to the hobbit as they made their way back into the heart of Rivendell.
Thorin kept his eyes low as he thought of their next course of action.

"I think Thorin," Gandalf sidled alongside the dwarf, "Perhaps we will require a little more stealth
than charm."

"What are you suggesting?"

~*~

"And when the New Moon rises our new year begins. Thus the cycle starts all over."

Marie was taking in this new information with great eagerness and interest. She had learnt more
that evening from both Balin and Elrond than she had in the forty nine years she had walked this
earth and was enjoying it. Balin invited her to join them for some supper Bofur was preparing in
their room and she gladly accepted. It was quite a shock to her when she saw at least half of the
furniture being used as kindle for the small bonfire in the middle of the room.

The only one absent was Thorin of course. Whatever he and Gandalf were planning was for their
ears only, so Balin was sent back to relay all that they had learnt.

Marie sat herself on the edge of a chaises lounge that had been spared with her red coat folded
under her arm as a pillow, Balin stood across her using the wall to support himself. The other
dwarves moved about the room creating more mess as they went, leaving dirty clothes on banisters
and Old Toby shavings all over the floor. Marie swallowed any qualms she had about such
behavior and just focused on her conversation with Balin.

"We have something similar in the midwinter, it's called the Yuletide. The first two days are called
the First Yule which celebrates the end of the year before the Winter Solstice. The following two
days are the Second Yule, the beginning of the year. It's one of the most important events for us
hobbits."

"A six day celebration? Anymore occasions you hobbits like to glorify?" Balin asked, folding his
hands into his sleeves.

"We have our fair share, Yule and Lithe being the biggest. Any reason for a party and good food I
guess."

Balin nodded in agreement, "I like that way of thinking."

Marie adjusted herself on the soft pillowed seat, folding her legs under her. "Balin, you lived in
Erebor correct?" She spoke with caution.
"Aye."

"Could you tell me about it ... please?"

The grin he gave her was a good sign. "Where to begin?" He pondered.

"From the beginning?"

The old dwarf chuckled at Marie's wit. "Indeed. Well, long ago when the dwarves were driven from our ancient halls of Khazad-dum, they traveled East until they found the Lonely Mountain. Thrain the Old may have founded it, but it was his grandson Thror who made it the greatest stronghold of our age. He took the title of King Under the Mountain and brought honour to the line of Durin."

"You keep referring to this Durin. Just who was he?" Marie asked as she started to rebraid her hair.

"Durin was the eldest and noblest of the Seven Fathers of the Dwarves, the first of our race. He is also called Durin the Deathless."

Before Balin could go on, the large door creaked open and Thorin came striding into the room, his large shoes clunking on the wooden floor with each step. Marie was thankful that she had tucked her feet in otherwise he would have trampled them. The rest of the company halted what they were doing to look at their leader.

"I take it the talk with Gandalf went well?" Balin was the only one brave enough to ask. Thorin only gave a slight tilt of the head in response. "We leave before dawn."

"Are you sure Uncle?" Kili piped up from the corner.

"Now that the elves now of our quest they will try to prevent it. We must make haste, Durin's day will come on swift winds." Thorin said. There was a general sound of consciences from the men and they slowly went back to their personal tasks, but the general mood became calmer than before. Marie was now convinced that Thorin had some pacifying influence unseen by the naked eye. He took a seat on the other end of the lounge.

"We are not going to stay longer? Shame really." Marie murmured. This caught Thorin's attention. "Were you hoping to spend day after day exploring until you remembered every inch of this place?" He pulled his pipe out in a huff.

Marie said nothing, for she had actually hoped to do that.

"You have good timing Thorin. I was just telling our burglar about Erebor." Balin said in a jolly voice. Thorin looked at Marie, appearing even more tense than usual. In fact Marie could see what she thought to be a hint fatigue in his eyes. "And what interest would a hobbit have in Erebor?" He asked. Even his voice sounded tired.

"A lot actually." Marie answered.

"Yes. Well where was I?" Balin continued with his tale, "Ah yes ... Erebor. The stronghold itself lies entirely within the mountain, carved out by the finest craftsmen. From the highest peak to the deepest mine, every step and pillar the result of hard labour. It is a city of emerald stone."

"Aye it is." Thorin breathed, a trail of smoke fleeing his parted lips. "In the Great Hall of the King, the throne sits under a reversed peak of unrefined gold which runs like veins through the mountain. The light of the rising sun that creeps in creates vast amounts of colors to brighten even step you
take, some you could not possibly name. The mines and lower halls glow like crimson and amber as numerous dwarves stoke great flames, where the finest metals and jewels become things of wealth and beauty. You hear the smith's voices as they work from anywhere, as if their songs were carved into the stone so that none will forget it."

Marie was so lost in his tale that she forgot about her unfinished braid. She could hear the nostalgia laced in every word as he spoke. His tired eyes were not looking at the floor but at distant time, a time he remembered with fondness. Even Balin seemed to be lost in the memory.

"Is that why you wish to go back?" She asked in a small voice. "So that you don't forget?"

Thorin swiveled around a little and cocked his head to one side. "I wish to reclaim what is rightfully ours. It is as simple as that." He looked over Marie's shoulder towards where Fili and Kili were idly refilling their pipes, "So that those who have never seen its beauty can call it home for themselves."

"I can understand that."

Thorin gave a scoff at the hobbit's words. "What could you possibly understand?"

"My father built Bag End himself so that our family would always have a home in the Shire. If I had lost it ... I wouldn't know what to do." Her answer must have impressed Thorin for his expression softened a little. "It may not be a giant stronghold or a fine palace, but it is still a home."

"A home." Thorin whispered and looked down once more at the floor, "Indeed."

~*~

The fire had all but burnt out as the hours rolled along. The dwarves all fell into deep slumbers across the floor and misshapen bedrolls and the humble sound of snoring filled the room.

Only Thorin was still awake for sleep would not come easily to a troubled mind. He had been silently planning their next route as the others dropped off. He had hoped to take the Gap of Rohan, but time wouldn't allow for it. The paths through the Misty Mountains would be their only choice at this point.

A slight rustle by his side momentarily distracted Thorin from his thoughts. Marie had fallen asleep still curled up on the end of the lounge.

Thorin was sure she hadn't intended to fall asleep, but as Balin continued with his stories her eyes began to droop and her body lent sideways until she was out like a light. She rested one arm under her head as her curls lay scattered around her. Her small frame rose and fell with every slow breath and her other arm was wrapped tightly around her for warmth. He found himself reaching for his thick fur coat and laying in onto of her shivering body.

She immediately responded and wrapped herself in the fur, her hair fell across her eyes and caught in those long lashes.

They day's events must have taken a toll on her, yet she looked peaceful and ... dare he say even lovely.
Again he berated himself for such foolish thoughts.

Still, he gently wiped the curls from her face and tucked them behind her pointed ears.
Beneath Dreams and Fur Coats

'Mankoi naa lle sinome? Manke naa lle autien? Khila a'oomo Cam'wethrin'

A voice, with all the sweetness of fresh strawberries in the Spring but barely louder than a whisper, stirred Marie from her sleep. Her eyes opened and her body sat up before she even noticed the fur coat that had been covering her fell and pooled at her feet.

The voice spoke once more.

Marie felt there to be no choice but to find it.

She stepped over the prone figures of the dwarves to arrive at a set of stairs leading from the small balcony still covered in dwarf socks down into the garden below. Small faerie lights guided her past flower beds of blue lilies and white forget-me-nots. Stone statues hidden under years of growth peeked out, the white luminescence contrasting with the dark emerald leaves.

In distant groves, elves walk by in their flowing gowns as they stared up into the night sky, taking no notice of the hobbit.

'Mankoi naa lle sinome? I' men peliannen iv ad na dail lin.'

Marie stepped with absolute care not to make a sound, for fear that the stone path beneath her feet would crack and she would fall into the abyss. She could not explain it, but it was like she was following a thread though the garden, it pulled her and she went willingly. The moonlight pierced the groves and casted long streaks of light along her path as she drew closer to the whispering.

The stone path curved and Marie found herself at the foot of large steps leading up to a stone pavilion that sat high atop one of the waterfalls.

The whispering stopped and all Marie could hear was the gentle roar of the water.

She swallowed hard and kept on going. The air around became heavy with a think aura, like a great power lay at the end of the path. The many possibilities rattled Marie's bones. She finally arrived at the doorway to the pavilion, where lily shaped lamps hung on each pillar to light the round construction. It felt so big and vast to Marie, reminding her just how small she really was to this world.

A tall figure whom Marie thought to be another elf, stood on the other side of the pavilion, facing the crescent moon. Marie realized quickly that it was a woman standing there, clad in a long robe that stretched out far behind her. Against her better judgement, Marie drew closer until she stood about a foot from the silver trimmed gown, but must have snapped a twig or scuffed the floor without noticing for the woman's head turned slightly. Her hair which looked like golden threads of silk falling down her lean back swayed with the motion and the shimmering material of her gown shone with different shades of silver.

Marie then saw the elf ears, confirming her thoughts.

This elf woman however was by far more fair and mysterious than her brethren, with white flawless skin and yet such strong define features worth of royalty. She even wore a glittering circlet that sat firmely on her brow and held up a portion of her hair at the back.

But despite her perfect beauty, Marie had to step away in slight fear of her gaze. The elf's eyes were
as blue as the night sky behind her and as sharp as a knife.

"Mae g'ovannen Peredhil" The gravity and power of the elf's voice struck at Marie's core. It was the same voice that had led her there. "You heard my calling."

"Uh ... yes ma'am." Marie choked up. "My name is Marie. Marie Baggins." She gave a tiny curtsey which felt odd in pants.

The elf gave no sign that she had heard her and just stared down at her. It was like Marie was back in Bag End meeting Thorin for the first time, but where as he was just dismissive of her, the elf displayed no emotion. It was the passive feel about it that made Marie uneasy.

"I am known as Galadriel."

Her name alone held an ethereal ring that was delightful to hear.

"You said that you called me." Marie said once she found strength in her voice again.

Galadriel nodded. "I know that you travel with Thorin Oakenshield, at the bequest of Mithrandir."

'Mithwho?" Marin blinked in confusion.

"He is known by many names. The Grey Pilgrim, Storm Crow, Istar, the Wandering Wizard."

"Gandalf?"

Again Galadriel slowly nodded as her head. "Yes."

"I wasn't aware that he had told anyone about this." Marie muttered to herself.

"He did not." Galadriel said, hearing the hobbit clearly, "The earth is keeper to all secrets in this world. Some are just good listeners."

Marie had no idea what she was talking about, and again she felt compelled to step further back as Galadriel simply gazed down at Marie. The hobbit could swear that her eyes changed color ever so slightly, becoming lighter.

"Tell me Halfling. Why do you follow Thorin?"

Marie gave a poor light hearted scoff, "I'm not following him. Well, I mean I'm merely accompanying him, and but that I mean the company. All thirteen of them, not just Thorin." She said, just barely tripping on her words.

"Then why do you accompany him."

"Because, well ..." Marie couldn't find the real explanation herself, she looked down at the buttons on her waistcoat in an awkward fashion. "I guess my Took side got the better of me, and I felt ... I felt ..."

"You felt something you hadn't felt since you lost him."

Marie head shot up.

"You rarely look forward in life, only at what you had then and what you have now."

"I ... I don't understand ..."
"You know of what I speak Halfling. You know in your heart that you can not move forward without being reminded how lonely you are." The sweetness in the elf's voice turned grave and full of truth.

"Look." Marie plucked up a little courage, "I don't how you ... know these things, but let me just say that I am not lonely." A presence pressed on her subconscious, silencing her.

'The more you look behind, the harder it will be to move on' Galadriel's voiced echoed in her mind, 'Listen to your own voice and trust in it, there you will find forgiveness.'

'Forgiveness?'

'For yourself.'

Marie felt like she had been stripped bare by this elf, unable to hide or face the truth of her words. She was saved by the familiar pontificating of Gandalf in the distance. "I do not believe that Thorin Oakenshield feels he is answerable to no one, nor for that matter am I."

'So ends this tryst Mariellena Baggins. Now ... you must wake up.'

"Wake up."

Marie woke to someone shaking her shoulder, her eyes fluttered like a hummingbird's wings yet unable to stay open.

"What?" Her lips and throat were dry and in need of water.

'That was all a dream?'

Her eyes gradually adjusted to the dark and hovering above her was a face. Before she could make out whose, it was gone. She took a long breath in to fill her heavy body with the early morning air, but was hit with the smell of burnt wood and iron. She twisted her head but found herself with a facefull of fur, it tickled her nose and she wanted to sneeze but held it in. "A coat?"

"Alright. Let's pack up and be gone from here already." Marie recognized Dwalin's voice and the mumblings of the other as they packed up their supplies and weapons.

She sat up right and held the coat out in front of her.

'This is Thorin's.'

"Here we are Marie." Kili said as he dumped her travel pack on her lap. She had forgotten it had been left in her own unused room.

"Oh, thank you." She gave the young dwarf a polite if not slightly dazed nod of gratitude. Kili in return gave her one of his goofy smiles. His smile however faded to a serious line once he noticed what she was covered by.

"What are you doing with Thorin's coat?" He asked.

"To be honest, I have no clue. It was just here when I woke."

"Huh." Kili's brows knitted together as his mind tried to process the bits of information, "Well, come on then." He gave Marie's shoulder a 'little' tap before walking off.

But she did not immediately move. She instead continued to look at the large coat, running her fingers through the soft texture of the fur and the tough leather inside. She again breathed in the
smell, the odd blend of wood and iron had an interesting appeal to the senses.

'I wonder if Thorin smells like this.' Marie realized quickly how inappropriate that thought was and promptly placed the coat away from herself. He tips of her ears burned while she unfolded her own badly creased jacket.

~*~

With silent steps, the company of fourteen left the elven halls without any encounters with the elves.

Marie felt quite sad to be leaving such a beautiful place so soon, and wished to at least say goodbye to Elrond and thank him once more. Also she was still in utter confusion from that dream. It had felt so real and yet had left her in the hazy aftershock of a dream.

Galadriel's words lingered in her mind and filled her with a desire to seek her out once more and demand answers, if she was at all real. But, she merely followed along behind Kili with Fili close behind her. The poor dwarf kept crashing into her every time she slowed to glance back at Homely House.

"You alright Marie?" Fili said the third time this happened.

"I'm fine." Marie finally remembered something crucial. "Where is Gandalf?"

"Wouldn't have a clue. He comes and goes as he pleases, as is the wizard way."

The magenta and violet sky turned to gold as the sunrise crept into the valley, but the path they needed to make it to the Misty Mountains was still bathed in dark shadows. It was steep and hard, especially for tired hobbit feet. They all hefted the bodied up the mountain side with many grunts and quiet curses.

"Careful, we're about to step over into the Wild." Marie heard Thorin from up ahead. "Balin, you know these paths. Take the lead."

She looked back once more at Rivendell, allowing Fili and the other dwarves to pass by. Perhaps Galadriel was real. Perhaps she should stay and ... and what? It was only a dream.

"Miss Baggins. I suggest you keep up."

Marie sighed pulled her gaze away from the valley only to find it now resting on the dwarf king, looking ever the force to be reckoned with. And she was walking right towards him.

"Do you know why Gandalf is staying behind?" She asked him when she was close enough.

"He has his own business to attend to, and it is nothing that concerns the company or nosy hobbits." Thorin answer was as blunt as always but emphasized the 'nosy hobbit' part. Marie wished she had something witty to say in response, instead she held her tongue. Better to do that than sour their already precarious relationship and further.

In a way, her silence was her gratitude for his small if not mysterious act of kindness to her.

"He will join us ... later." He tacked on quietly so only Marie could hear.
He may have still turned his back on her the minute he had said it, but Marie knew now that beneath that large fur coat there was some warmth.
Battle on the Narrow Pass

If a bird souring across the vast sky stretching from one end of the horizon to the other bothered to look down, it would have beheld the sight of a long drawn out line of dwarves, plus one hobbit, traveling east like ants towards the Misty Mountains. The company hiked up steep rock faces and back down into barren valleys, tramping through vegetation as tough and unforgiving as the mountain's weather. For the sturdy and nomadic dwarves, the constant changes were dealt with in the usual dwarf fashion of sticking it out and joking about it later. Marie on the other hand struggled with the increasingly demanding journey. She had never walked as long as she had before and the fatigue was starting to take its toll on her, her usually tough hobbit feet and legs now bore tiny cuts and gashes from the trek. But she followed suit with her companions and kept her woes to herself.

Each day was a repetition of the last, making it difficult for Marie to keep track of just how long they had been walking. On some days, Thorin would insist that they keep moving well past dusk to cover as much ground as they could and to keep one step ahead of the orc pack that had hunted them on the East road. Some of the dwarves, veterans like Gloin, Oin and Dwalin insisted that a pack would not bother pursuing them so far into the mountains and the presence of the elves would have deterred them, but Thorin’s will would not be bent and so they moved on in the dark and freezing nights until their legs would at times threaten to give out beneath them.

With each step made eastward, Marie could feel her heart being pulled west as if it was attached to something back there with thick rope that burned when resisted. This sensation first began not long after they had left the Valley of Imladris and left her feeling almost nauseous at times.

Had she'd know that she was going to feel like this, she would have stayed in Rivendell.

Soon Marie saw only the green of weeds and moss that crawled across the cold stone's face as their path took them right into the heart of the mountain range.

"Wait." Balin brought the company to a sudden halt at the opening to a barren stretch of land nestled in between two of the mountains and gestured to Thorin to join him. The company took this unplanned respite for all its worth and rested themselves on boulders and weapons. Marie ducked her head behind her upturned collar to shield her face from the blasts of cold air coming down from both the northern and eastern slopes.

"One thing I love about the mountains." Bofur said with a hint of sarcasm, "The constant chill you get in the bones."

"Bbriillliiennttt ..." Marie's teeth chattered together like hooves on a cobble path, but the sound that came out of her throat made Bofur quirk his head at the hobbit. "You don't sound too good there Marie. Swallowed a bug on the way up?"

"I did." She answered bluntly. But Bofur only brushed her comment aside with a wave of his hand, "Don't worry, some stew will make it all better."

"A cup of tea would be far better." Marie muttered to herself and turned her focus elsewhere, namely the loose top button of her waistcoat hat she was fiddling between her thumb and index finger, catching her broken nails of the copper carving of an acorn on its face. She knew she shouldn't fiddle for if she accidentally twisted the thread any looser the button would pop off, but once it becomes habit then it is impossible to break.
"What is it Balin?" Thorin asked his friend, brushing past Marie and Bofur.

"The path easiest to take is this pass. It would take us right to the edge of the Greenwood. But .." Balin shook his head and look up at the sky. "I've miss timed the seasons."

"How so?"

"Look for yourself." He pointed to the black clouds hiding behind the peaks, the sound of thunder could be heard in the distance. "That storm is a large and fierce one and when it hits this whole valley will flood, then there will be no means for safe passage. We'll have to take the Narrow Pass."

Thorin knew what this meant.

"Are you sure there is no other way?"

Balin gave a deep sigh, "Though dangerous, I would rather take it than face flash floods."

"Understood." Thorin nodded and turned to bellow out this change in plans, "We make for the Narrow Pass!"

Unfortunately for Marie, she had been standing behind him when he shouted and was so surprised that she pulled her button and its thread clean from its hole.

"Oh lovely." She mumbled and pulled the worn thread from the back of it.

"You will have time to count your coins when we reach the Greenwood Miss Baggins." Thorin said.

Marie rolled her eyes and held up the inch wide piece of copper for him to see, "It's only a button. I hadn't the time or the thought to bring my purse." She corrected him, but quickly regretted doing so as his face looked like it was repressing a sneer of annoyance. She slid the button into the back pocket of her pants with surety that it would safe there.

If she had a chance in the near future she would mend the waistcoat, only for the sake of the buttons. Her father Bungo Baggins had them specially made in commemoration of Bag End's completion, and for his affinity for the large oak tree under which he built the family home which they had shared.

Marie was sure that its leaves would be changing their colors soon, and with it her garden's flowers. Most would be choking on weeds by now and others would be dying of lack of love.

There it was, that tugging that made her eyes drift west again. This time her actions had been caught by Thorin. "Are you expecting to see the glittering lights of the Hidden Valley Miss Baggins?"

"No." She answered quickly and looked back at him to prove her point, "Why would you assume such a thing?"

"Doesn't the decor and generosity of the elves suit your tastes better than that of the Wild?"

"I wouldn't have thought you'd care what my tastes are."

"I don't."

Marie resisted the urge to pout in frustration and turned her gaze down to end their brief exchange.
This irritated the dwarf who left her standing there with Bofur. "Keep a close eye on our Burglar." He ordered Bofur as he did, "We can't afford to have her falling off the path."

Bofur gave only a nod at the retreating dwarf and a confused wide eyed look to Marie, "The chief seems more high-strung than usual. Has anything foul happened between you two Marie?"

Marie answered with a stiff lip, "He just doesn't like me."

"Well, don't worry." Bofur clapped her on the shoulder, "The rest of us like you, some more than others."

"What?"

"Oh, nothing." Bofur said with a cheeky grin, resisting a glance over at a certain young dwarf. "Come along. This climb will not be without its challenges."

'Since when was anything without its challenges.' Marie took in a deep breath of the cold mountain air to steady her ruffled emotions, only to have her lungs freeze over.

~*~

The Narrow Pass was a small passage that cut along the mountain side. Every year a little more erodes away, and every step could potentially be the last if not careful. It took the company high about the earth and into the dangerous heights of the air. The path was so slight that for Bombur he had to shuffle along it sideways to balance out his impressive girth.

The storm hit them hard and fast, with the wind bringing forth droplets of rain that were the size of goose eggs and just as biting as the icy blasts of wind almost blew them off the mountain. Whatever orders Thorin bark out were lost in the wind and the fourteen unfortunate victims as the storm snuffed out the sunlight, sending the world into an early artificial night. Marie felt her nose and fingers quickly go numb and her already weary feet started to wander far too close the path edge. Had it not been for Bofur's watchful gaze and hand, she might have toppled over into the floods that raged on far below.

As the night fell, the dark grey clouds that hung above the mountains turn black and rain grew even colder. Aside from the terrifying claps of thunder and forks of lightning, a strange groaning like broken trumpets and animals in pain filled the air. It was a sound so strong Marie thought she could feel the mountain shake from it.

But she was wrong, for it was the mountain itself that groaned.

"Look out!" Dwalin screamed. Marie looked up and saw a giant boulder soaring though the sky. "Take cover!"

It hit the side of the mountain right above the Narrow Pass, shattering into smaller sharp pieces of debris that rained down onto the travelers. Marie threw her arm around her head and pressed herself into rock face to escape the falling rocks which took half of the Narrow Pass with them.

"This is no thunder storm. It's a thunder battle. Look!" Balin cried out. When Marie moved her arm away she saw what Balin was pointing at. On the other side of the ravine, she watched in horrified awe as two stone arms and a giant head pulled away from the mountain, followed by a stone torso
and two legs. When it was completely free it stood even taller than the mountain it had spawned from.

Bofur stepped dangerously to the edge to get a closer look as it pulled off another chunk of the mountain, "Bless my soul, the legends were true. Giants! Stone Giants!"

"Take cover you fool!" Thorin screamed at him and Fili pulled him back in line. Just in time too, for the giant tossed the boulder high into the air. Marie felt sure it was aimed at them but she heard the groaning of another giant coming up from behind them. The boulder's impact was like an explosion as it sent to giant backwards.

The most the dwarves and Marie could do was hope and pray that they could make it past the fight and avoid being used as rocks themselves.

But before they could think of moving on the rock face cracked and spit open, dividing the company into two. They were trapped on the legs of another giant rising up from its place to join the fray. "In the name of Durin, hold on for you lives!" Marie couldn't be sure who had shouted that order, but she did not need to be told twice. Marie clung to the rock for dear life at the first giant drew closer, its footsteps shaking shards of rock free from its enormous body.

Before the giant they were trapped was fully erect, its opponent head butted it, making it crash into the mountain. From her position, Marie could see Thorin, Kili, Balin, Nori, Oin, Bifur and Gloin safely escape the leg they were trapped on.

Now Marie's half needed to find their means of escape.

The giant swiveled to regain itself before facing another blow. It was so violent that Marie might have been thrown off the creature if Dwalin hadn't placed his arm out in front of her. The opposing giant was beaten back with a stronger punch.

Marie was too terrified of dying than to be ill from all the swaying and jolting.

The third giant that had been downed earlier made its comeback and tossed a boulder, which took half the second giant's head off. The stone body began to collapse, and the first to go was its knees. They buckled under the mounting weight and which sent it straight towards the side of the mountain. Fortunately Dwalin was able to fathom a plan.

"When I give the word, jump for that alcove." He pointed to a small space on the mountain they were heading for.

"What?!" Marie screamed.

"Just do it!"

The pace began to build as they were propelled towards the solid rock.

"Ready lads?"

Marie squeezed her eyes shut, unable to face death.

The earth disappeared from beneath her and she fell.

'I'm going to die.'

CRASH!
When Marie opened her eyes, she saw she was not dead. She had fallen but unbeknownst to her, she had managed to grab onto a ledge just below where the stone had collided. She found her feet once more and both them and her numb hands gripped onto the rock as the Stone Giant fell down behind her, crashing and rolling into the flooded ravine, letting out one last howl that maybe her ears want to bleed.

"No!"

That cry of anguish couldn't only belong to Thorin. For a brief second Marie feared the worst.

"We're alive!"

The hobbit let out the breath she had held in when Bofur's voice echoed from above.

"Marie? Where's Marie?"

Marie looked up in response to her name being called, a foolish decision for the raindrops hit her eyes and blinded her monetarily. The forks of lightning did not help her cause.

"Lass!?"

"There she is!"

Bofur, Dwalin and Ori bent their heads over the ledge looking for their burglar and all appeared horrified at the sight of her dangling so far from the edge.

"Come on lass! Climb up!"

Despite not being able to see properly she began to climb back to the pass, allowing the dark blurry movement she could make out above to guide her. Her struggle to pull herself up plus the combined weight of her travel pack and her inability to get a firm hold on the rock reminded her how out of practice she was. Regardless she clawed desperately at the stone, letting it cut into her palms and fingers. She was thankful she could not feel the pain.

"Just don't look down, don't look down." She repeated over and over again. She knew if she looked down she would be paralyzed with fear.

"That's it Marie, you're almost there!" Bofur reached down, Kili and Ori holding down his body so he wouldn't slip off the edge.

It was still too far for Marie.

"Someone get a rope!"

"We don't have any rope!"

Amidst the commotion above, Thorin clasped a rock protruding out from the path and swung down, his large boots catching on the rock face to steady him. "Take my hand."

Marie found herself a small ledge to push her arms off from and her bloodied fingers reached for his outstretched hand. The rock supporting her however broke away and she let of a small shriek as she felt herself falling, but Thorin's large hand quickly gripped her wrist. For a second Marie could see clearly her own fear mirrored in the dwarf's face as he literally had her life in his hands. "On three, grab the ledge." He ordered.

Marie nodded and held on to his wrist tightly. "One ... two ... three." With one deep growl, he
heaved Marie up and into his chest and she grabbed at the ledge. Thorin wrapped his arm around her waist and helped push her up into Bofur's arms. Marie felt hands on her arms and travel pack as she was hoisted up. Dwalin alone assisted his king back up.

"You're alright now lass." Bofur said and rubbed his hands up and down Marie's arms to both comfort and warm her shivering form.

"For a moment there I thought we'd lost our burglar for good." Dwalin grunted and brushed off small pebbles that stuck to his fur vest.

"She's been lost every since she first stepped out her door." Thorin said before Marie could even think to thank him for saving her. "Dwalin, in here."

The two taller dwarves disappeared into a small opening that was situated in the corner of the alcove. While that happened, the dwarves helped one another recover from the ordeal. Bofur kept his arm around Marie as her stirred into the opening. There they found a narrow cave that allowed enough room to house all fourteen weary travelers.

"Let's get a fire going." Gloin rubbed his meaty hands together in glee at the thought of a nice warm fire.

"No. Caves in the mountains are seldom unoccupied." Thorin said, still unsure of their safety. "Bofur, you take the first watch."

Most of the company groaned and began to pat themselves down to remove shards of stones from their beards and cloaks. Marie just sat herself down against a wall to look at her hands, slowly but surely feeling the pain seep in as the numbness wore off. Half a nail had been ripped off her ring finger and there were shades lodged deep under the surviving ones and the gashes on the knuckles.

Kili lent his bow and quiver next to Marie and knelt by her side to check up on her, "It seems fortune has not been kind to you today Marie." He held out his open hands to her, asking to look at her fingers with his eyes. He was very careful with his inspection.

"Oin. Do you have any ointments left?" He called the old dwarf over, who held up his ear trumpet.

"What lad?"

Kili repeated himself slowly, "Oh dear. I may have something." Oin rummaged around in his knapsack for the right jar.

"May have what?" Thorin asked as he passed them during a second inspection.

"Ointments. For Marie's hands." Kili showed his uncle her injuries. Thorin stared for a moment, but quickly dismissed it. "The Wild is no place for a woman, not even the roughest hands are immune to its harshness."

'He saves me from falling to my death, then goes on to belittle me for my gender. Why didn't he just leave me back there?' Marie's bitter thoughts must have been made clear in her expression. Kili's hands carefully closed around hers. "He doesn't mean to be so brash Marie." He said in a gentle voice once he was sure Thorin was out of earshot, "That is just who he is."
Lost

In the small dark cave with only the sound of thunder and snoring to sooth the mind, Marie dreamt that she was back at Bag End as she would often do when sleep finally came. But something was different with this dream.

All of Bag End was empty. No cupboards, no chairs, no crockery, no books. All but Marie's armchair was gone.

The fireplace had no simmering blaze, just ash and soot.

It left the hobbit hole with a cold atmosphere, unwelcoming and lonely.

Marie was sitting in her chair with a book in her lap, but there were no words. She flipped page after page, but all she saw were blank pages.

How long had she been reading a book with no story?

In the silence surrounding her, she thought she heard her name being called, but from where? She closed the book and rose from her chair.

She knew the voice, but couldn't place it. It was too far, too long ago in the mind.

Each step towards the front door felt like stepping on ice. It was so cold. Marie was hesitant to open the door, not fully knowing what was behind it, but the voice was growing more urgent.

The green door swung open, and all Marie could see was the green hills of Hobbiton.

Not a soul could be seen. Marie craned her neck to peer at the door.

Where was the voice?

There was but one lone figure running down the path, away from Bag End. Marie recognized the bright emerald waistcoat and blonde curls and ran out the door.

"Alistair!"

She had to follow.

She tore through the green hills past hobbit holes and fields, desperate to keep up with him. She called out to him to slow down, but to no avail.

She followed until the hills turned into dark trees that towered over her.

Marie stopped and tried to remember where she was ... and why she was running.

Alistair was nowhere to be seen. He didn't leave her again did he, or had she been the one abandon him?

"Where am I?"

"We need to now! Come on!" It was a different, more confident voice that cried out from the dark thicket.
Move where? Marie couldn't see the path ahead anymore, only the road back home. "I need to go back."

But a hand took her own and pulled her into the dark. It was large, strong hand, firm to the touch but warm.

She was dragged further into the unknown, each step like lead, but Marie could bare it, so long as the hand was there to guide her, to comfort her.

But this feeling of certainty did not last for long.

Marie could feel her hand slipping further out of the opposing force's grasp as she struggled to keep up. She willed herself to keep moving, but the strain was too strong and her legs burned with pain.

"Marie?" The voice she had followed whispered again and Marie turned her head to look back.

There was no one there.

The last remnants of warmth left her tired body as the hand finally slipped away, leaving her to fall to the ground, cold and frightened.

"No... please." Marie whimpered into the dark, "Don't leave me."

Then the world went black.

The hobbit's eyes shoot open, seeking out what small light pieced the cracks in the cave from the outside world. She moved but an inch when she felt a sharp jab of pain from her fingers. They were crudely bandaged and tucked under her arms as Marie had waited for Oin's medicine to take affect before sleep. It seemed some pains needed time instead of ointments.

But her fingers were the least of Marie's concerns.

She sat upright from her damp bedroll and rested her head on her knees. Her dreams usually consisted of pleasant images and happy memories, sometimes presenting questions with unsolved answers. But this dream just left her feeling lost.

Lost and alone.

Marie hated it. Hated the cave, hated the mountains, and hated herself for going on this journey. What a fine time for her to be struck with doubt and homesickness.

She scanned her eyes over her fellow company members with a conflicted heart and head.

'You know you'll not survive another day, and you only hold them back with your decrepitude attitude. Stay, and prove yourself. What can a hobbit offer to fighters like the dwarves other than food? You made a choice, stick by it. You'll never be accepted by Thorin.'

Marie rubbed her face harshly, leaving red lines from where the bandages had scratched her skin. She was a fool. Not even a Fool of a Took, just a fool.

With great care, she rolled up her bedroll, buckled her sword belt, slipped on her pack and slowly made her way over the sleeping dwarves. She stopped to make sure Bofur hadn't spotted her yet but he was fast asleep sit, still upright from his position as first watch.
'Bless him.' Marie thought. He would be tired after watching out for her all day. She wished she could at least say goodbye to him, but then she would have to say goodbye to all of them, then leaving would be harder to do.

No, it was better this way.

She stopped at the entrance to inspect the conditions of the storm, but it was a poor decision to make.

"Just where do you think you're going?"

Marie wished the rock would break open once more and swallow her up. But alas, she had been caught by Thorin of all people. His boots crunched loudly on the grainy bed of the cave as he approached her, but did not cause the company to stir from their slumber.

Whatever pride Marie had within her, she mustered it up and said in a monotone voice, "I'm going back to Rivendell."

"You give up our quest so easily for finer company I see."

"Must you presume to know me?" Marie snapped, but still kept her eyes down. "From there I'll take the road back to the Shire. I am of no use to you so I will not burden your quest any further." Marie went on.

Thorin raised an eyebrow. "If I recall, you seemed more than happy to joy our quest. When did this change of heart occur?"

"Since I almost fell off the side of the mountain barely hours ago."

"If every man turned back at the sight of doom, then there would be no tantalizing stories to marvel children."

"I thought I was only a woman and unfit for the Wild." Marie made clear her frustration at Thorin's earlier comment.

"Look at me." Thorin growled.

She did. She glared right into his bright blue eyes, establishing a connection they had never had before. Neither blinked or faltered, only stared at the raw emotions swirling within the depths of their eyes. "You have made it clear more than once that you have no desire for me to be here, so I will not trouble you anymore."

"So I may not presume to know you yet you may to your own conclusions about me now." If Thorin raised his voice any louder, he would have woken the company. "You are under contract, remember now. You must forfill ..."

"I pick pocketed handkerchiefs and watches for a laugh when I was a child, that doesn't qualify me for anything. Gandalf was wrong, I'm not a Took. I'm just a Baggins."

"What has that to do with who you are now?"

"You wouldn't understand." Marie shook her head, "I just want to return to my home, where I belong." She tried to leave, but Thorin was not done yet. He yanked her back by the crook of her arm, "As do I." He said, his menacing scowl dangerously close to her face, "Do not think that you alone know what it means to miss your home."
"Thorin?"

Both Marie and Thorin looked towards the corner where Bofur sat. Their argument had finally woken the look out from his unplanned nap. "Is something the matter? Marie?" Bofur's eyebrows knitted together when he saw how his king was handling Marie.

Before Thorin could explain their compromising situation, Marie felt something shifting beneath them, followed by the sound of rust metal scrapping against one another. Bofur and Thorin looked to their feet when they heard the noise. As if by instinct, Marie looked down at her side to gaze at her sword. She could faintly make out a thin glowing blue line just where the sheath and hilt met. Lord Elrond's words came flooding back to her.

'There is an enchantment on the steel. It will glow in the presence of Orcs and Goblins.'

Marie felt the shifting again, only this time the floor began to slip through a large crack that ran from one end to the cave to the other.

Thorin grip on Marie's arm only tightened to the point of hurting her instead of him releasing her. "Wake up. All of you!" He belted so loud they would have had no choice but to wake.

The final gear shifted and the floor opened like a trap door, sending everyone whether asleep or awake down into the heart of the mountain.
Down they all rolled and tumbled, through a carved out tunnel that bent at odd angles. Their possession and weapons fell with them and once or twice collided with the dwarves. Their rough journey came to a stop in a large net made of carved wood and worn rope, built of a lone peak.

"Ohh, what in Durin's name ...?"

"Bombur get off before you suffocate us all!"

Thorin and Marie were the last to fall into the trap and had a much better view of where they were. A series of torches light up an inner cavern that could have stretched the length of the Misty Mountains.

"Where are we?" Marie asked in a petrified whisper as her eyes zoned in on the skulls mounted on the poles holding up a bridge that connected the rock pillar to the rest of the rickety path.

The design of the trap and the bridges that lead up to it pointed to only one vile race, one which Thorin had hoped to avoid more than the elves.

Goblins.

A cacophony of snarls and ear wrenching shrieks filled the cavern and Thorin watched as dozens of them crawled out of their holes and up from the deep to see their catch. They were horrible fleshy things with the faces of disfigured bats and claws like a birds talons poised and ready as they descended upon the company. Thorin reached for any of the weapons that were scattered among them, but smaller, quicker goblins had already snatched them up to leave the dwarves defenseless.

But they would not go without a fight, especially from Dwalin and Bifur.

The snarling creatures pushed, pulled, prodded and just about yanked the hair from the dwarves' beards as the company was dragged through the dim tunnels, only stopping when one of the dwarves got a good punch in. But the sheer number of goblins made it impossible to establish any counter attack. They were brought furthing into the mountain and right into the heart of the Goblin Town. A city made from bones, termite infested wood, rusted weapons and reasonably fresh corpses. Magpies and rats hung from the many bridges that spread across the badly light cavern like spider webs.

More goblins crowded the path to get a glimpse of their new playthings, but were cleared by the goblins heading the group who wield worn out iron chains. Thorin turned on his heels when he heard Marie give a little yelp as a snickering goblin hanging from a loft of human bones reached down its spindly arm and grabbed a fistful of her hair, but thankfully Dwalin swatted the disgusting hand away, growling more insults than anyone dared to count. It was then Thorin noticed that she alone still had her weapon.

Straining his head to see over the gruesome scalps of the enemy, Thorin saw to where the goblins intended to take them.

In the center of the festering maze rested a lone pavilion of sorts where a large throne made of stolen goods and animal skins rested. One by one the company was brought across the narrow bridge and rounded up like cattle for all of the goblins and their king to see.
The Goblin King was the very image one would conjure when thinking of gluttony, hideousness and downright foulness, complete with a crown of bones. All ten feet of his molded hide oozed over every inch of his throne as he picked at his fingernails with his sceptre of skulls, his glassy eyes passing over his offering of prisoners and their stolen weapons. His slid off the old throne and landed with squelching thud onto the platform. "Who would be so bold as to come armed into my kingdom? Spies? Thieves? Assassin's?"

"Dwarves your Malevolence." One of the head goblins with a high nasal voice answered.

"Dwarves? Here?"

"Found them on the front porch."

Thorin ground his teeth together in anger.

The Goblin King pointed his sceptre at the company, "Don't just stand there, search them!" The dwarves were again handled like satchels and stripped of the meaningless of trinkets. Thorin prayed that they would not find the map or key. If they fell into the goblin's hands, the quest was lost. Thorin struggled against his captures, even with blades ready to bleed him everywhere he looked.

"Look. This one ain't a dwarf." Another goblin squealed and pulled Marie through the group. Oin, Dori and Kili tried in vain to take her back but the goblins moved like worms and easily filled the space between Marie and the dwarves. They brought her to the front to present their find to their king.

"Well bless my boils. A little hole builder, all the way from the west." The goblin King chuckled. His subjects who lined the surrounding walls and platforms gave a terrible squall as they stared down at Marie. She clutched the sword still sheathed at her side but did not have the wit to use it. Thorin could tell she was as scared as a rabbit trapped by a wolf pack.

"And she's armed, how charming. Bring me her weapon."

Two goblins rushed to carry out the king's command, their sharp claws tugged and picked at her belt buckle. "Get off me!" Marie tried to push away the goblins, but the snarled and spat in her face. One even ripped the brass buttons off her waistcoat in the struggle, the little round pieces bounced and rolled across the wood for other smaller goblins to snatch up for themselves. Several of the dwarves had a great fuss at the sight of the little hobbit being handled so violently, and Kili shouted the loudest.

When the leather band finally gave way, the head goblin guard who spoke before took the small blade and handed it to the Goblin King. He held it tip to tip between his fat thumb and index finger.

"Not much of anything, not even a tooth pick." The ghastly monster huffed and tossed Marie's sword over the platform, its destination the dark abyss bellow. Marie made a small noise that made the goblins snigger.

"Any more goodies you'd like to share, hole builder?" The Goblin King held out his greedy hand for more and the goblin started poking her feet with knives and bones.

The Goblin King grinning face morphed into inquisitive the more he stared down at Marie, "Your face seems familiar, like I have beheld before. Bring her to me."

"Leave her be."
It went silent as Thorin stepped forward, the dwarves and goblins parting for him. He did not fully understand whether it was his sense of honor to those in distress or his small genuine concern for Marie that made him speak up. Either way, he placed himself in front of the hobbit.

The king's eyes widened and a smug look came across his face. "Well, well, well. Look who it is."

Thorin gentle pushed Marie further from him to put her out of the Goblin King's reach.

"Thorin, son of Thrain, son of Thror. King Under the Mountain." The king gave Thorin a mock bow but quickly, if he could be at all quick, stood upright once more, "Oh, but I'm forgetting you don't have a mountain, and you're not a king, which makes you nobody really."

Thorin gave no reaction to the insult. He had grown accustom to being treat both as the king he rightfully was, and a pauper scraping for a living in the towns of men.

"Now my little hole builder, come forward." The Goblin King waved his sceptre at Marie, the skulls of it jangled loudly. Marie took small step out from behind Thorin, but his arm shot out and prevented her from any further, keeping them level with one another.

"Mmm yes." The gobbling King caught Marie's chin with the end of his sceptre and twisted her face back and forth. It became disconcerting when he began to laugh. "Haha of course. How can one forget a nose like that." He poke Marie's nose with sceptre. "I was a young goblin at that time, but I will never forget that face. The face of one who helped made me king."

"What?" Marie stopped tending her nose and stared confused at the Goblin King.

"The largest of your kind, bold as he was foolhardy, was kind enough to remove the head of my predecessor with his club some years ago. He might have stolen our victory, but I gained my crown thank to him."

"Bullroarer Took? That story was true?" Marie's jaw hung open.

"A shame really. For one so large to have such tiny descendants." The whole cavern was filled with the grunting and screeching of laughter at Marie's expense, but the king raised a hand to silence them, "But still. I shall show mercy, in respect for the Bullroarer's kin and also bestow a great honor upon you."

"And what is this honor?" Thorin asked, staring at the creature from under hooded eyebrows while simultaneously tugging Marie back inch by inch.

The Goblin King gave Thorin a fleeting glance and a deep chuckle that herald ill will. "Little hole builder, your death with be quick and ... reasonably painless. And you will be honored when I place you head on my throne."

The cavern erupted with noise again, cheers from the goblins and yelling from the dwarves.

"Over our dead bodies will we let you harm her." Bofur said firmly, his brothers backing on that.

The only ones to be silent were the mortified Marie and the scowling Thorin, who gave Marie a gentle push backwards. She found herself enveloped by the dwarves, Bofur and Doir standing in front while the rest surrounded her, Kili even wrapped an arm around her shoulders.

"I know someone who would pay a pretty price for your head." The king now addressed Thorin, "Perhaps you know of whom I speak. An old enemy of yours."
For a moment, only one name came to Thorin, but it was impossible for it to be true. But what the Goblin King said next was highly unnerving

"A pale Orc astride a White Warg."

"Azog the Defiler was destroyed. He was slain long ago." Thorin stated loud and clear. But the goblins all sneered and laughed at the statement.

"So you think his defiling days are done?" The king laughed and waved to his messenger, "Send word to the Pale Orc. Tell Him I have found his prize." The messenger nodded and disappeared off into the cavern via a transportation line. "And as for me, I will have my own prize."

The dwarves packed in tightly to protect Marie, but the goblins began striking at them with spears and their chains to break up the defence. It wasn't long before Marie was separated and restrained by two goblins near the edge of the platform. Thorin tried to throw off the burly goblins that held him back and failed. The goblins began to chant in their twisted language, begging to see spilled blood.

"Remember, make it as clean as you can. I did promise mercy." He king ordered and another goblin stepped out of the crowd as Marie's executioner.

"Wait, please. Please!" Marie's eyes welled up with tears of fear as she begged for her life, but this only amused the Goblin King further. Thorin felt dread in his gut and tried once more to free himself. Once he stopped struggling, he finally took notice of Fili reaching under his arm brace for a small dagger he kept hidden.

The goblins held Marie out by the arms and the executioner readied his blade at her neck. Just as it pulled back, Thorin gave the word. "Fili, now!"

His nephew aimed good and true, his dagger landing in between the eyes of the goblin. Its arm was still in motion but took off the head of one of Marie's captures. The goblins squealed in protest to the attack and the king growled. For a brief moment Thorin felt relief that he did not have the hobbit's blood on his hands, but it was all too soon. The now beheaded goblin still had an iron grip on Marie's arm, and the rest of its corpse started to tumble backwards, over the edge of the platform. Both Marie and the remaining goblin were still in a moment of confusion and could not stop themselves from being dragged over the edge.

The screams of both Marie and the goblin blended into a single sound.

"Marie!"

No one could tell who had screamed out the hobbit's name, for the voice was so raw and pained it was unrecognizable.

"You dwarves will pay for letting my prize get away like that. Bring up the Bone Breaker." The Goblin King shouted, his subject buzzing at the thought of more torture. "I believe the King of Nothing needs entertainment."

But Thorin was not listening to the goblin. He just stared at where had disappeared, unable to believe what he had seen.

Marie was gone.
Darkness.

It swallows up everything into its cold embrace and leaves one frozen until numbness remains.

Maybe it was the same in death.

At least that's what Marie thought.

Instead of the void of death many expected when facing death, she found herself in a past memory of a particular Autumn morning many years ago.

Although she could not recall the sensations of scent of touch, and the sounds were softer than a mother's whispering to her child, the images played out before her as vivid as if she was there again, barely a day over nineteen, rosy cheeked and budding into a fine Baggins.

Herself and Bungo Baggins were sitting together on the little wooden bench in the garden. Bungo had his long pipe in hand and was showing Marie how to form smoke rings while she pondered on his riddles. The earliest parts of the conversation were hazy, but Marie remembered the smoke rings, and how they disappeared into the grey sky as the wind carried it away.

Why had she been hiding outside again?

Oh yes, she was supposed to help dust off the bookshelves once Belladonna was finished sorting out the jams from second breakfast, but the taste of another trip to Northfarthing had been sitting on her tongue all morning.

She was waiting for Alistair.

"Hobson Gamgee should be round later with 'the item'." Bungo said, his pipe wedged in the corner of his mouth.

"Oh, you mean the roses you ..."

"Hush dear Mar." He patted her knee. Marie was too excited for her mother's gift to remember it was a surprise. "Our last few weeks of secrets will be all for nothing."

"Sorry Papa." Marie took his hand and grinned. It should have been warm, yet it wasn't. "I'm sure Mama will love them. But where did Mr Gamgee find them?"

"His cousin out near Bindbole Wood brought down a few branches. I'm hoping that they can still be replanted." Smoke seeped out of his lips as Bungo spoke.

"I still can't believe it's Mama's birthday next week." Marie's feet swung back and forth, "It will be nice to see Aunt Mirabella and Uncle Isembard."

"Indeed. Now remember, no mischief. Herdrick Burrow is not happy about you and Alistair bullying his son."

"We do not bully Harold Papa. We're just making merriment ... at his expense. It's harmless fun."
Marie said with as much innocence as she could muster to hide her laughter.

"Just promise me you won't cause trouble." Bungo gave her hand a squeeze.

"Alright, I promise. Mama will be happy to hear that."

"Yes she will. Now, have you an answer to my riddle yet?" Bungo grinned while Marie groaned, "I told you, let me think."

"It's really quite simple Mar."

"But you never give me enough time Papa."

"You've had plenty of time, but you spent it on what you will do today no doubt."

"Maybe I did."

Bungo's belly laugh was muffle and strange to Marie.

"One more time Mar. 'Lives without a body, hears without ears, speaks without a mouth, to which the air alone gives birth.' What is the answer?"

"It's ... oh ... uuggghhh. Damn!"

"Mariellena."

"Sorry." Marie apologized meekly. "It is a ..."

"An echo?"

Both father and daughter looked up at the owner of the voice standing at the gate with a devilish grin and hands in his coat pockets. "Correct young Alistair." Bungo pointed his pipe at the young hobbit while Marie beamed up at him and leaped to her feet. "Good morning Al." Marie passed though the open gate and looked back at her father. "I should be home by supper."

"And not a moment longer. It's getting colder in the evenings now." Bungo said.

"I will Papa."

"And you Alistair Took. If I hear word of you trespassing with my Mar as an accomplice one more time, you and I will have to have serious words." Bungo threatened him with the end of his pipe.

Alistair ran his fingers through his golden curls, "You have my word Mr Baggins. Marie will be safe with me."

Bungo's grin returned. "I believe I'm owed a riddle Mar." He popped the pipe in his mouth, anticipating the afor mentioned riddle.

Marie looked along the fence that encircled Bag End as she thought of a good one, the green grass appeared even darker in the Autumn and Winter, like a pure emerald.

"Bound so cold with stone, thatch and wood, yet holds more warmth than any hearth ever could."

Bungo's bushy eyebrows wriggled up and down as he processed her words. "I've never heard that one before."
Marie slipped her hand into the crook of Alistair's arm like it was mere fog, a smug grin on her young lips. "It's one I made myself."

"Oh dear. It's not a heart ... fire maybe."

Marie glanced up at the bare branches of the oak tree, their leaves sat around the top of Bag End like a rusted crown. "It's a home."

She had expected to hear a hearty chuckle from her father, to look down and see him rocking back into the bench with his cheeks ruddy red as Alistair steered her down the road like she remembered. But what she saw and heard caught her so off guard that the memory slowed down around her.

In her father's place sat Thorin, his strange pipe resting in his hand while the other braced itself on his knee. His face was soft and tired, partially hidden under his black hair.

Marie had seen this side of him only once before, at Rivendell.

"A home," He murmured. "Indeed."

Behind his imposing frame, brooding attitude and overall roughness, Marie saw the decades of sadness, the bitter sweetness of memories recalled and the vulnerable position the hard dwarf was placed in, all in that tiny moment. All he wanted was to go home, to where he belonged.

'Do not think you are the only one to understand.'

How insensitive she had been. What was a few weeks compared to decades, centuries even, of wish for home? Marie now knew that she had been wrong to presume she was alone in her misery. She was just about to let herself be consumed by guilt until a pair of blue eyes flashed before her.

'You rarely look forward in life, only at what you had then and what you have now. The more you look behind, the harder it will be to move on'

As she was steered away further and further towards the memory, she looked back at the dwarf.

Or was she looking to the future?

She opened her mouth to call out to Thorin, but was overwhelmed by an earsplitting sound that reverberated in her head, like heavy metal colliding. Despite the pain it brought, there was a pleasant ring within the folds of its knell. The sound shook the foundations of the memory and the tree line behind Bag End began to fade away.

Thorin raised his head and look to the east. "We need to move."

The sound chimed out loud and strong once again.

Marie pulled away from the apparition of Alistair, who faded into the blurry past. She reached out with a bloodied, aged hand which Thorin grasped firmly. It was then she could once again feel something.

Pain ... and the cold.

Chapter End Notes
Yet another small filler chapter, but I promise it's all character building.
"Gollum ... Gollum."

Marie's eyes would not open, it hurt too much. The most she could move was her head a quarter of an inch, but even that brought sharp jolts of pain.

A brief flash of memories hit her, the weight of the goblins pulling her backwards ... the frantic grabbing at nothing as they fell ... the burning of ropes as they tore the bandages off her hand ... the first impact with the rocks ... the tumbling ... the soft landing.

Soft?

When her eyelashes became unstuck from the flakes of chipped stone, her sight was filled with dark brown plants that resembled deformed mushrooms.

"Gollum ... Gollum Aaahh!"

Marie tensed as the terrible choking bounces from wall to wall and every one of her sense came to life. Through the mushrooms, she could make out the second goblin that fell with her being dragged deeper into the unknown chasm, by what Marie did not wish to learn in a hurry. At first she thought it to be a fresh corpse but its bloody chest rose and fell with shallow breaths. It was still alive, but not for much longer.

"Nasty goblinses. Better than old bones precious ... better than nothing." The raspy voice of the unseen creature faded further into the dark.

The little hobbit held her breath as she waited until the sound was no more than a distant echo.

Marie willed herself to sit up, causing all her body to cry out as a choir of aching muscles. The rubbery surface of the mushrooms provided a soft enough surface to push herself up onto her shaky legs. She looked around at the high walls that entombed her, yellow and brass colored moss grew in patches on black and silver stone. The ground was hard and slipperier, and not to mention covered with shattered bones and rotting flesh that made Marie's stomach churn as she stepped out of the mushroom patch. It was a world untouched by neither good nor evil, real life nor permanent death.

With a roll of a shoulder she felt a small crack at the junction between her shoulder and neck and the tension there dissipated. It was a stroke of dumb luck that she was alive after a fall like that, but luck it would seemed was favoring Marie for the time being since just beyond the patch of mushrooms she caught sight of her sword, dangling by its belt and sheath on the rocks.

'I must be in the running for a third stroke of luck now.' Marie almost voiced her thoughts but stopped, knowing any sound she'd make would attract the creature that lurked nearby.

A cold wetness ran down the side of her face. Marie immediately felt for any gashes or cuts that she had not aware of, yet couldn't feel anything other than what she thought was her blood. Her hand crept from her temple to her crown, still nothing but wet curls. She yanked her hand away and saw her fingers and the scraps of bandages stained black.

It wasn't her blood.

The realization that her 'soft' landing may not have been just the mushrooms made Marie, against
her better judgement, looked back at the landing site. The headless body of the other goblin was lying twisted and broken, bleeding out onto the cold ground and had cushioned Marie's landing.

She doubled over and fell to her hands and knees as her stomach gave painful convulsions that forced what little there was in her stomach up into her throat. The bitter acidic taste made her feel even sicker but she could ill afford to make any noise, so with a giant gulp she re-ingested the horrible bile.

Marie curled her fingers into balls to try and bare both pain and disgust.

'So much for luck ... wait ...'

Something pressed into her right palm when she clenched it. It could have been a rock, but it felt ... round. Marie sat back on her heels and raised her closed fist to inspect the unknown object. She opened her hand and beheld a ring. A simple golden ring in prime condition, no scratches or smudges, nothing. Just plain gold that caught in some unknown light as she turned it in her fingers. She was mindful not to stain it with blood as she brought it closer to her face.

An unexpected find in such a place and Marie's fingers closed around the ring.

She pulled herself to her feet and remembered her present situation. She needed to find her way back to the dwarves or at least a way out of the mountain. She slipped the ring into the right pocket of her waistcoat and tiptoed to retrieve her sword. The blue glow of the blade was visible through the thin slit between the hilt and the sheath, meaning that there were more goblins close by.

She carefully freed the leather belt from the rocks. The belt itself wasn't badly damaged and could still be used.

"Nnnnnooooooouuuuuggghhhhh."

The hairs on the back of Marie's neck stood on end from the wailing coming from just around the bend and she instinctively grabbed the sword's hilt.

"Too many boneses precious, not enough flesh! Shut up! Cut its skin off."

Unlike the sensible hobbit she usually was, she went towards the danger on the grounds that maybe the way out of the cavern was that way. She quickly tied the belt around her waist in a crude not, pulled out the blade quietly and crept around the rocks.

What Marie saw was a huge cave that looked to span a kilometer wide and a kilometer high with a large black lake. Moonlight that found its way into the mountains offered some light in the darkness, reflecting off the still surface and onto the walls and jagged rocks rose out of the water, one of which the mysterious creature, whose silhouette of the creature resemble what Marie thought to be a goblin, sat with its prey, groaning and make choking noises as the goblin let out the occasional growl. Marie scampered behind a large rock to hide the glow of her sword, ignoring the piles of fish and bat bones, among other things.

"The cold hard lands, they bites our hands, they gnaws our feet. The rocks and stone, they're like old bones, all bare of meat."

The creature struck the goblin across the head in time with its merry off key singing, like when the little old dwarf women at the markets would hum away when plucking poultry.

"Cold as death, without no breath is good to eat."
Marie had let her hold on her sword grow slack and the tip had fallen to the ground. She pulled it back up and pressed herself into the hard rock, praying that the creature didn't hear the sword drop. The cavern went quiet and the glow of the sword flickered until it completely died. The goblin was dead, and the singing had stopped.

'Maybe it's eating now.' A horrible thought to have, but far better than the alternative of the creature coming to bash her head in with a rock.

It was still too quiet.

Marie breathed deep through her nose to calm herself, but stopped when she heard it. The ragged, congested sounding breathing that was coming closer, and it was coming from above her.

She slowly looked up and saw a hand reaching up over the rock, followed by a head and a torso. Its eyes where glowing from the water's reflection and for a moment, Marie believed that they would be the last thing she would see. The creature leapt down and Marie came face to face with ... two wide eyes the color of blue. The creature looked more human like than anything and appeared to be no bigger than Marie was. In fact she could swear that, for just a few seconds, she was staring at a sickly hobbit.

"Bless us and splash us precious. That's a meaty mouthful." It said with a large grin.

It took Marie a moment to recompose herself and process what it had just said. She didn't wish to be anything's next meal. Before the ... creature could come any closer she raised her sword between them, pointing the tip at the hollow of its neck.

"Gollum, gollum." It sounded like it was going to cough up something onto Marie's lap but it moved back in fear of the blade. Marie pushed it towards the creature, forcing it further from herself as she got to her feet. "Stay back. Don't come any closer to me." Her voice did not sound like her own, it was too gravelly.

The creature crawled away to sit near another rock, its breath loud and sickly. "It's got an elvish blade, but it's not and elfes." It muttered. Marie got a better look at the creature as it had its back to her. It was so skinny that it might have been a moving skeleton with a thin layer of pale, blotched skin pulled over the bones while a few strands of grey hair stuck to its scalp and large ears. The only piece of clothing it had was a shredded loincloth held together with thin sting and a tiny pouch. Its hands and feet seemed disproportionate from the rest of the body. It may have looked weak, but Marie's gut told her not to lower her sword just yet. "Not an elfes no. What is it precious? ... What is it?"

The creature turned back to her, its face twisted with a mixture of disgust and confusion.

"My name ... is Marie Baggins."

The creature cocked his head and appeared more confused than before. "Bagginses? ... What is a Bagginses precious?"

"I'm a hobbit ... from the Shire."

"Oh, ohahahaha." The creature shook its head as it laughed, "We like gobblinses, batses and fishes. But we hasn't tried hobbitses before." Marie didn't like to carefree tone it was taking, nor did she like the sudden intensity that filled its eyes, changing them. "Is it soft?" It crawled back to her, "Is it juicy?"
"Now just ..." Marie swung her sword back and forth clumsily to ward it off. "Just keep your distance. I will use this."

The creature screeched in defiance but stayed away from the swinging metal.

"I don't want any trouble. If you could just point me in the right direction, I'll be on my way." Marie pleaded.

"Why? Is it lost?" He, Marie guessed it may have been a he once before, pulled itself behind the rock.

"Yes and I want to get un-lost promptly."

"Oh, we knows." He popped his head back up and pointed a long bony finger into the cave, "We knows safe paths for hobbitses. Safe paths in the dark. Shut up!"

Marie jerked her head back in shock, "I didn't anything."

"We wasn't talking to you." He grumbled before ducking his head again, "Oh yes we was precious, we was."

The creature's constant flipping between emotions made Marie uneasy and unsure how to be, "Look I'm not quite sure what game you're playing at but I ..."

"Games?! Oh yes we love games." The creature jumped with glee onto the rock, "Does it like games? Does it? Does it like to play?" The look of excitement on his face almost deterred any fear Marie may have had and she answered with a shrug, "Occasionally."

His mouth formed noiseless words before something came out. "What has roots that nobody see, is taller than trees. Up, up, up it goes and yet never grows."

'A riddle?' Marie never expect to hear that come out of such a thing, but knew the answer all the same, "The mountain." The creature was pleased and let out another strange laugh that sounded like it was festering in the base of his throat. "Let's have another. Come on, do it. Do it again, come on. No! No more riddles no!" He jumped of the rock and crawled to the water's edge, looking back at the hobbit with pinpoint eyes. "Finish it. Finish it now Gollum ... Gollum."

"I want to play." Marie blurted out quickly. "I want to play a game."

It was now clear to her that this being held two very different personas, one more violent than the other and in charge no matter what. If she could keep one at bay and satisfied, she may yet stall the other long enough to find the way out.

"I can see that you are very, very clever. Clever enough to fool a dozen men."

It was working. The sunken in face that was so full of rage dropped for but a second and a new one stared up at Marie. She had the passive side's attention, now she had to keep it. "How about a game of Riddles? You like riddles yes?" Marie moved the sword so that the blade faced away from him, showing that she meant no threat.

'Just stay calm Marie. Play to his needs and your strengths.'

"Yes, yes yes." He hopped like a frog over to her side. "Does it like riddles?"

"Yes. How about this? If I win, you show me the safest paths out of the mountain. Fair?"
He nodded, "Yes, yes mmgghh." The other personality took over again. "And if it loses, what then? Well ... hehe ... if it loses precious then we eats it hehe ... if Bagginses loses we eats it whole, mm?"

'Oh dear.' Marie was having doubts about her plan, but it was her best and only chance. "Fair enough."

Marie took a step back from the creature to sheath her sword, and to put as much ground between them. Should this game turn sour, Marie wanted a head start in running. The creature's dominant half watched carefully as the silver blade slid into its casing before allowing the more diminutive half to resume control.

"Well Bagginses first." He rested his hands a head on the rock, looking up expectantly.

Marie cleared her throat and began the game. "Thirty white horses on a red hill. First they champ, then they stamp, then they stand still."

The creature's face lit up as it processed the riddle. His eyes fluttered every second and his mouth moved up and down as he thought he had it but lost it in a second. Marie felt confident that she may yet win.

"Teeth?"

Then again she may not.

"Teeth!" The creature laughed and applauded his little victory. Marie forced a smile to play along but quickly dropped it when the creature said menacingly, "Yes, but we only have nine." He bared the nine rotten and chipped teeth at Marie, but they looked more like fangs to her.

"Our turn." He circled round the rock, letting his fingers slide on the jagged surface, "Voiceless it cries, wingless flutters, toothless bites, mouthless mutters. Ohh oohh, we knows, we knows! Shut up!"

"The wind, of course." Marie said with a smirk which irked the creature. He growled through his nine teeth and blackened gums, "Very clever hobbitses, very clever."

Marie quickly came up with the next riddle before it could do anything. It just so happened to be one that everyone she knew got wrong. "A box without a hinges, key or lid, yet golden treasure inside is hid."

The creature twiddled his fingers like he was trying to open the unknown object. "A box ... a key ... no ... it's nasty ... a lid ..."

"Well?" Marie asked.

"Oh give us a chance precious, give us a chance!" He banged his fists on the ground and strained his face so hard, the thin veins rose like tiny mountains along his head as he tried to find an answer. Marie was sure that she made such a face a few times when she was a child.

"Eggsees!" He screeched, "Wet crunchy little eggsees. Grandma taught us to suck them yes."

Marie bit her lip in frustration, she felt so sure that he would not get that one. Unfortunately, she took her eyes off the creature for a second and allowed him the chance to slip into the shadows.

"We have one ... for you." Marie looked around herself to try and find him, but his voice was
everyone at once. He could have been anywhere she had her back to, but no matter where she
turned she was open to an attack.

"All things it devours, birds, beasts, trees and flowers. Gnaws at iron, bites at steel, grinds hard
stone to meal."

Marie’s breathing grew more erratic as she became more panicked, waving her arms behind her
and in front to feel for anything. She hadn’t heard this riddle before.

"Answer us."

"Wait just a moment. I gave you a good long while." Marie said, her voice sounded constricted
from trying to hold it together. "Devours all things ... birds ... beasts ... trees? ... I don't this one ...

"Is it taaaaasssttttyyyyy? Is it sccccrrrruuuumptioooouuussssss?" Marie felt cold fingertips
reaching for her neck. "Is it crunchable?"

She jumped away just before the creature could close his fingers around her neck. He was
crouched on another rock close to the high cave wall, his knees tucked right under his chin as he
stared with evil in his eyes. The light reflecting off the water lit up his face until it was almost
translucent.

"Now wait." Marie held up her hand to stop something, but what? The creature if he lunged at her?
Any further disconcerting comments he made? Time itself?

"It's stuck. Bagginses is stuck."

Marie shook her head. "I said ... give me a moment."

'I told you, let me think.'

'It's really quite simple Mar.'

'But you never give me enough time.'

Devours all things. Can eat away iron and stone. Never enough of.

'Never enough ... time ... time ...' "Time."

The look of shock on the creatures face was all Marie needed to be sure. "The answer is time."

He gritted his teeth to suppress a growl, Marie had to jump back to avoid the flying gobs of saliva.
"Last question precious. Last chance." The little hobbit did not see the large stone the creature had
coiled in his hand.

Marie tried to pick a riddle, but the creature's impatience and her nerves were not making the
choice easy. "Ask us. Ask us!"

She mimicked her father's habit of hooking her thumbs into her waistcoat as she thumbed through
the mind's library, but she was distracted by her thumb brushing against something smooth. She
had forgotten about the ring she had found. She resisted looking down at her pocket and pulling it
out to admire, for an idea popped into her head. The creature wanted a question, then a question
he will have.

"What have I got in my pocket?"
The creature blinked in surprise, turning up his nose and shaking her head. "That's not fair. That's not fair, it's against the rules!" He threw the rock hard onto the ground where it bounced off another and landed just off the water's edge. "Ask us another one."

"You said to ask you a question. That is my question." Marie said and moved her hands away from the waistcoat. "What have I got in my pocket?"

The creature launched itself off the rock and landed in pile of bones, "Three guesses precious, it must give up three." He demanded, holding up two fingers.

"Alright then, three."

"H And ses!"

Marie held up both hands. "Wrong. Two more goes."

"Oooooohhh ... fish bones, goblin's teeth, bats wingses, broken shells ... uuggghhhaaaahhhh! Knife! No shut up." He belted his head in for that answer. Marie felt a grin creeping onto her face. "No. One last guess."

"String ... or nothing."

"Now that's cheating. But unfortunately for you, neither is correct."

Marie had won. The creature fell to its side and started sobbing like a child. Marie couldn't tell which persona was in control but still demanded her prize.

"Now, said you'd show me the way, so please do."

The creature stopped crying suddenly. "Did we say so precious?" The aggressive half said, "Did we say so?" He pulled his slim torso off the ground and looked menacingly over his bony shoulder, "What has it got in its pocketses?"

"A button." It wasn't technically a lie, she did have a button in a pocket. Something in Marie gut told her not to tell the truth, for if she did she would regret it.

"Show us then. Show us the buttonses."

"You don't need to see anything. You lost."

"Lost?" He slowly crawled towards Marie, "Lost?" He reached around to the little pouch on his loincloth but something changed. His expression dramatically shifted from terrifying to worried. He reached with his other hand, but grew even more frenzied. "Where is it? Where is it?!" Marie could only watch in confusion and slight fear as both personas began searching frantically amongst the filth and waste for 'it'. "Where is it!? No, no no no no no! Precious!" He darted across the water's edge and swiped his hands like a mad man. "No! Curse us and splash us, my precious is lost!"

Marie's hand slowly slid up her thigh to her waist, "What have you lost?"

"Mustn't ask us! Not its business! Gollum ... Gollum." He sunk down pathetically on the rocks and went deathly quiet. Marie took the chance to sneak the ring out from her pocket.

'Don't let him see it.' A voice with told her.

The creature mumbled to itself and Marie could see him shaking. It wasn’t from the cold, it was
with anger. "It stole it." The shaking got worse as his head turned. Marie began to back off, slowly and clumsily, never taking her eyes off the creature. She squeezed her hand tightly to secure the ring, ignoring the pain from her previous wounds.

"It stole it!" The two sides of the creature melded into one very angry being that was about to explode with anger. A horrendous scream erupted from him and he threw a rock at Marie.

'Run. Now.'

The rock grazed the side of Marie's head, but did not inflict too much damage. She took off like a hound back down into the cave with the creature close on her heels. That's when she heard a deep drumming, coming from above. Its steady, hypnotic rhythm matched Marie's heartbeat.

"Theif!!!
Marie skidded to a halt, her large feet kicking up rocks. She had hit yet another dead end and the creature was getting closer. She had managed to out run him for a time, but each twist and turn took more precious time as she looked for the way out.

Her fist squeezed tighter, the gold ring still within.

'Why the bloody hell do I still have this thing?' She looked hastily at her fist. This ring was what he wanted, so she should just give it back. Yet she couldn't. 'He is going to kill you either way.'

She automatically turned to go back but froze when she saw the gangly creature rush pass the path she had taken.

She was trapped.

That had to be a way out. She looked closer at the walls surrounding her and found a slim crack. She could see another path on the other side.

She slid herself through but got herself stuck mid way. The screaming was coming closer and Marie's heartbeat sped up once more. She turned her head and saw the creature back tracking until his glowing eyes spotted her.

With one last push she was though, but not any safer. She stumbled a little and the ring fell out of her hand onto a small patch of black dirt. Marie scrambled to retrieve it.

"It's ours. It's ... OURS!" The creature's shadow could be seen through the crack.

Marie finally pulled her sword out to defend herself, and unknowingly slipped the gold band around her middle finger.

A heaviness fell over her body, like a wet blanket.

The world turned into a blur of dull greys and wispy illusions. Each noise was painfully long and echoed in her ears, and since when was the wind so loud?

Despite how lethargic her physical being was, her mind felt as light as mist. In those first few seconds of surrealism, Marie had forgotten about her pursuer who came flying through the crack. Marie felt the breath before the scream building in her chest, but stopped it when the creature passed her completely and looked around wildly her.

He could not see her at all, yet she was in front of him.

Marie look at her hand, the gold band glowed brighter than a flame. Was it magic that coursed through her, weighing her to the earth?

"Thief! Baggin!" He screamed and continued down the path.

Marie followed quietly, watching the lingering figures the creature left behind.

~*~
"Bones will be shattered, necks will be wrung.
You'll be beated and battered, from racks you'll be hung.
You will lie down here and never be found.
Down in the deep of Goblin town."

The ten foot king 'danced' about the platform and sang in a shrilly voice you would not expect from such a grotesque monster. The goblins that circled the company pushed and prodded them to move along with the horrendous noise, as they had been forced to do the last four times the Goblin king had sung that verse. They could not do much with all their weapons piled up just out of reach, only grit their jaws and listening to the beat of an unseen drum.

The sound filled Goblin town from the lowest cave to the highest peak. It spurred the goblins to stamp their feet and strike chains across the walls to add volume and power to the noise while those who carted the heavy torture devices pulled harder up the rickety path to the Goblin King's throne.

The dwarves could either wait to be tortured for amusement or somehow fight their way out. Thorin preferred the latter, but his axe and sword were currently being handled by two goblins with crusted backs.

"Well Mighty Thorin? Are you pleased with the entertainment thus far?" As the Goblin King cocked his head, his double chin jiggled. Thorin made his disgust all too clear to see. "The main event is yet to begin. I do wish that my little hole builder was still with us. Her headless corpse would have danced the night away for you."

The thought of the goblins performing such an act with Marie's corpse made Thorin's anger coil like a slimy eel in his gut.

"Bones will be shattered, necks will be wrung.
You'll be beated and battered, from racks you'll be hung."

The Goblin King started the song again and Thorin wanted to rip out his throat to make it stop. The only reason he did was due to the goblin holding Orcrist unleashing an ear piercing screech that catch everything and everyone's attention. The goblin had unsheathed the blade barely an inch when it tossed it to the floor as if it was diseased. The sight of the sliver metal sent all the goblins into a frenzy as they moved away, their king clawing at the back of his rotting throne as he stumbled back into it.

"I know that sword! It is the Goblin Cleaver! The Biter, the blade that sliced a thousand necks! Slash them!"

The goblins hissed and began beating the dwarves with clubs and chains as the king commanded. Thorin finally snapped and threw one goblin up over his head and into another. But five smaller goblins quickly latched onto him, pulling him onto his back.

"Kill them! Kill them all!"

Two of the goblins held Thorin by his arms, two at his legs and the remaining one pulled out a long jagged knife. Thorin watched the tip poised above his head.

"Cut off his head!"
The Goblin King's command was drowned out by an explosion of light, accompanied by an air blast that toppled the dwarves, the goblins and their king like books. The force was so great that some goblins were lifted off their feet and set face first into the torture equipment.

Where had that light come from?

While the goblins and dwarves struggled to pull themselves free from the mess, a tall silhouette emerged from behind the giant throne, a wooden staff in one hand and a long sword in the other. The figures' shoulders dropped as he let out a ragged breath he had been holding.

The light that had been sucked out of the cavern slowly returned and Thorin saw the face of one he did not expect to see.

"Gandalf." He murmured.

"Take up arms." The wizard said. "Fight. Fight!"

And so they did.

The dwarves shook off their captures, punching and head butting till they got to their feet. Dwalin swiped the goblin sitting on Thorin's chest, allowing him to toss the two holding his arms into the remaining two at his feet. Nori and Oin were closest to their weapons and started throwing them to their original owners, who put them to good use. Goblins rushed at Gandalf once they had recovered but fell victim to the wizard. It was the first time the dwarves had seen him fight, and for one of his disposition he proved to be a dangerous opponent as he sliced and hacked his way to the dwarves.

"He wields the Foe Hammer!" The Goblin King squealed, "The Beater, bright as day!" The creature was helped by his attendants to his feet and he began stumbling towards Thorin, determined to have his head.

"Thorin!" Nori cried and held out Orcist.

Thorin grabbed the hilt and pulled hard. The sound of the blade scraping on the sheath created a beautiful sound that frightened off the smaller goblins. With the sword free, Thorin struck the Goblin King's oncoming staff. The force of it was so strong that the king tumbled backwards onto the weak edges of the platform. The wood cracked and the

Goblin King's weight took him, his throne and ten more goblins down into the abyss.

"Follow me. Quickly!" Gandalf waved the company over with his staff and headed down a small path leading away from Goblin town. "Run!"

~*~

"Wait, precious, wait! Gollum ... Gollum!" The creature skidded out a tight path into another, then proceeded to jump in a circle.

It had been some time since Marie seemingly disappeared and the creature was unknowingly showing her the way out by chasing a ghost. Marie kept a safe distance from the agitated being. He may not be able to see her, but he could at any given time smell her of hit her by accident. Her
sword hung all but forgotten in her hand

But her luck seemed to be growing. The air in the tunnels smelt cleaner than before, and though the world was grey she could see light pecking around the corner up ahead. He stopped his spinning and appeared to be staring at something to his left. Marie could not see for herself what had silenced him, but she hoped that it wasn't goblins.

She looked at her sword. It wasn't glowing.

The creature scampered back behind a rock as the muffled sounds of metal boots and weapons crashed together drew closer.

"Hurry now."

That was not a goblin's snarl, but the worried huff of a wizard. Marie felt the hope stir and the smile growing when the back of the Grey Wizard covered sight of the path. Thirteen small figures run passed, Marie could make out Fili's light hair, Bofur's ridiculous hat and Golin's twin axes.

They were alright.

She wanted to call out to them, but she remembered that she could not been seen and they must have thought she was dead.

She watched despondent as they continued on without her. Gandalf too disappeared down the path to freedom.

The creature, who had all but melded with the rock, finally moved from hiding and looked on at the wizard. His noisy breathing was slower now, calmer. Maybe this was the chance Marie needed to be free from him. But there was a slight problem.

The pathway was slim, and the creature stood in her way.

She wouldn't be able to get by without ... killing him.

The thought made her throat dry, and her palms sweaty. Her fingers turned her sword in her hand, it shouldn't be too hard.

'Just do what Fili does, aim for the neck. It will be over quickly.' She raised the blade to the back of the skinny neck, ignoring the slight tremble of the tip. Once she had her aim, she pulled back slightly to stab the flesh.

She took shallow breath to calm herself, 'One move Marie, just one and it will be over.'

But something happened that Marie would have never imagined.

The creature looked back down the tunnels, his wide eyes unknowingly meeting Maire's. She did not see anger or fear in those bright pools of blue, but she did see the tiny tear falling from the corner of his eye. It left a shimmering streak along his skin and was caught on his trembling lip.

Her sword was now only a hair's width from his neck, but what stayed her hand from slicing the skin was the pity.

Even though he wanted to kill her and feast on her limbs, she felt pity toward the creature. With a deep breath she sheathed her sword.

That was a mistake.
The creature's eyes became pinpoints and his nose flared like a rabid wolf. He knew she was there, and he would kill her instead.

Marie did the only logical and merciful thing to do.

She punched him in the nose. It wasn't pleasant at all, but it still moved the creature out of the way. He fell backwards onto the flat path and Marie leap over his writhing hands that retched aimless for her. She landed with the grace of drunk and bounced from wall to wall before regaining her balance. The light of the outside world beckoned her out of the darkness and away from the screaming creature.

"Baggins! Curse it and crush it, we hates it forever!"

~*~

The dwarves and Gandalf ran hard and fast down the side of the mountain, out of breath and worn ragged from their fight. Foe after foe did they slay but there was always another goblin lurking ahead. Their only savior was the light of the sunset in the west behind the mountains. The goblins would not dare follow them until nightfall, so they ran far. Only when there was a good mile between them and the cave's exit did Thorin and Gandalf slow the pace.

The wizard counted off the company, as was his new habit of late, while Thorin lent on his sword. His chest felt tight in the confines of his chainmail. Dwalin stopped by his side and patted his shoulder, "Ya alright there Thorin?" He asked, his voice husky from lack of air.

"Better now."

Killing more than a handful of goblins made the king feel a little better, but not entirely.

"Fili, Kili twelve ... and Bomber. That makes thirteen."

The largest dwarf joined them at last after being left behind during the trek downhill, and the company was whole, save one.

It did not take long for Gandalf to notice his burglar's absence. "Where is Marie?" All the dwarves stopped gasping for air and froze. They were all thinking and dreading the same question. Who was going to tell Gandalf what happen? "Where is our hobbit?" Gandalf asked again. Fili and Kili looked to eachother, then to Balin who looked to Thorin.

Thorin held his tongue.

The tension was thickening.

"Where is she!?

"She ..."

Everyone turned to the owner of the small voice, and poor Ori was at the centre of all the attention for once, "She was pulled over ... by a goblin." He croaked up.

"Pulled over ..." Gandalf repeated, "Speak Ori, how did this happen?"
But Ori lost his nerve and was pulled back in line by Dori. Balin took over explaining to spare him, "Miss Baggins was unfortunately attacked by the Goblin King. We tried to prevent such a fate but we ..." Balin shook his head, "We were unable to help her."

Gandalf's eyes were overflowing with disbelief and sadness, which he turned onto Thorin. The dwarf dared not look him in the eye.

"I left her in your care with the hope you would kept her safe, Thorin Oakenshield." Gandalf's voice grew loud and thunderous. There was anger building up behind those words.

"I told you from the beginning, I would not be responsible for Miss Baggins' fate." Thorin thundered back. "What happened was beyond my control, and do not think that we did not try to save her." He glared up at the wizard, trying to match his stare. "She should never have come, she never had any place amongst us to begin with. You dragged her into this quest knowing the dangers, you knew the risk."

"Thorin." Fili said, but was ignored by his uncle.

"Perhaps if you had let her be, she would not by lying at the bottom of the Misty Mountains dead."

"Oi! I'm not quite dead."

Thorin's mouth went dry and he was stunned into silence, something that rarely happened. The whole company turned shapely in the direction of the voice.

There, behind Balin stood Marie Baggins, hunched over as she tried to regain her breath.

"Marie Baggins. I have never been so happy to see anyone in all my life." Gandalf breathed, walked over the hobbit with a large smile. Balin let out a half sigh of relief and took Marie's hand. "You are welcomed sight indeed lass."

"Marie! You're alive." Kili and Fili rushed to her side, placing hands on her shoulders and back to see if she was indeed real. "How in Durin's name did you survive?" Fili asked. Marie shrugged, "I had an overdose of spontaneous luck." No one but Gandalf seemed to notice the she-hobbit discreetly pocketing something small, but he thought nothing of it, he was too happy. Marie was soon surrounded by the rest of the dwarves, who were all still in shock but still glad that she was in one piece.

Only Dwalin and Thorin remained apart.

"Fortune comes frequently to that one." Dwalin mutter.

"Aye." Was all Thorin could say.

Thorin took in her messy attire with a mixture of emotions. She was covered in white dust and stone flecks that stuck to her coat and her, half her face was painted with black blood while the other half was smudged with dirt and her own blood. Her tiny hands and hobbit feet were red raw and when her eyes met his, he saw they were bloodshot and sunken in to her head.

She had been to hell.

But she was back ... with them.

She could have escaped out back to the Hidden Valley like she had wanted to, but she came back to him ... to them.
A sudden weight was lifted from Thorin's heart and he felt he could breathe easy again, yet he cast his gaze down in a moment of private shame.

The reunion was cut short by the faint howling coming from the mountain.

It was a howl they had hoped not to hear again.

Wargs.
Okay so for the purposes of the fic, everyone in universe can understand all "Orc" lines.

The reunion was cut short by the faint howling coming from the mountain.

It was a howl they had hoped not to hear again.

Wargs.

The company tensed as the howling grew louder. Each of the dwarves tightened their large fingers around each of their weapons. Marie thought that the cold that washed over her skin was fear, but soon realized that the sunlight had begun to disappear behind the trees, turning the world violet and blue. In the dark, the orcs would have the advantage.

Marie could already feel the earth tremble under her feet from the pounding paws of many ... many beasts.

"Out of the frying pan ..." Thorin hissed.

"And into the fire." Gandalf added. "Run!"

Marie's legs were still burning from her long run downhill to catch up with the company, so to have to run again only increased the fire pumping through her.

The company moved swiftly, dodging in and out of the trees as though to chase the fading sunlight. "They're coming!" Bombur yelled.

Marie looked over her shoulder and could see the glowing yellow eyes, even the glint of a fang.

She sucked in hard and pushed herself to go faster, but fatigue was already taking hold of her weak, sleep deprived body and it was taking every ounce of her will not to trip up herself.

But however, she did.

She tried to steady herself by ended up landing on a knee. This ended up saving her life as one of the large wargs that had finally caught up with the company leapt over her and skidded on the dried leaves and rocks. It snapped its jaws at Marie but was swamped by Thorin, Gloin and Dwalin who proceeded to kill it.

Kili stopped running and came back to scoop the hobbit up and back onto her feet. "Come on Marie." He clutched her hand so tight she had to swallow her yelping as he pulled her along.

"It's a dead end!" Nori called from up ahead.

It was ... literally.

The dwarves that had taken the lead came to a halt at a pointed edge of a cliff. They had run
themselves into a corner with no way out, and to top it all off the sun had completely set, leaving only the light of a half moon hidden behind clouds.

'What now?' Marie looked up at the tall tree. A thought sprung into mind and she pulled her hand out from Kili's.

"Marie, what are you doing?" He asked as he watched her run to the nearest tree and leap up to the lowest hanging branch. She pulled off an almost graceful somersault around it until she sat firmly on the branch. She ignored the sting of the bark on her wounds and the ache in her back to relish the fact she still had it after so many years.

"Well come on then!' She beckoned the young dwarf and his brother before pulling herself up onto the next branch.

"Into the trees. Climb!" Gandalf ordered the rest of the dwarves, "All of you, climb."

The younger dwarves climbed with ease while the older dwarves helped one another up. "Here Balin." Marie held out her hand to him and pulled the dwarf onto the branch. She hopped across to allow him room. Thorin was the last to climb as he stayed to make sure all his men had made it. He just made it up just in time as the rest of the pack swarmed the base of trees.

"How in blazes did they find us here?" He growled, coming up beside Marie.

"I do not know." Balin answered, "They must have been tracked us this whole time from the Valley."

"But there weren't this many before." Marie muttered.

There must have been more than thirty wargs, more than twice the orc pack from the Great East Road. They barked loudly at the company above them, snapping their huge jaws together with a sickening crunch. Marie gripped the branch above to secure herself. These wargs looked even more intimidating in the night, and their beady eyes glowed menacingly in the minimal moonlight. Even the few orc riders she could see looked more threatening than the first time.

'Gandalf I truly hope you a brilliant plan of escape.'

Marie scanned the trees for the wizard. She finally spotted his grey hat at the top of the tree situated right on the cliff's edge. He was holding a large moth close to lips and looked to be whispering to it. With a delicate puff the moth fluttered up into the sky and Gandalf watched it disappear into the night. Marie severely hoped that there was meaning behind his actions.

A loud snarl that overrode the other wargs brought Marie back to the present situation. She watched the wargs back down to make way for a large white warg, climbing onto a boulder at the whim of its rider.

The rider was just as large as the beast, in fact it was larger than the other orcs. Even with the moon hidden Maire could see the color of its skin.

It was white.

Some instinct within Marie already knew who this orc was, even before she heard Thorin whisper it in disbelief.

Azog the Defiler.
He was as just as Balin had described. He was a giant beast, larger than a mortal man, his body and face covered in red scars. In one hand he held a rusted mace and in the other ... twisted pieces of steel stuck out of a gangrenous stump where his other arm should have been.

The Pale Orc sniffed the air long and hard. "Do you smell it?" He said to his minions. His voice slow and dangerously slick, "The scent of fear?"

The orcs hissed and nodded.

Azog locked eyes with his lifelong enemy.

Marie could feel Thorin tense beside her.

"I remember your father reeked of it ... Thorin, son of Thrain."

"It can not be ...

Marie looked to the dwarf. Azog's words had struck him and she could see the painful emotions on his face.

Azog pointed his mace at Thorin, "That one is mine. Kill the others!" He growled and set his pack on them. The wargs ran at the trees and launched themselves up into the branches, some trying to climb them while others tore at the wood to get to the dwarves. The trees shook violently from the barrage of attacks and all the company could do was hold on for their lives.

"Drink in their blood!" Azog commanded the wargs, his orcs waiting with pointed blades for their share of gore.

One of Marie's feet lost grip on the branch and she felt herself falling backwards. She automatically reached out for something to hold onto to, and the first thing she grabbed was Thorin's arm. Instead of giving her a glare of annoyance like Maire expected, he took hold of her arm and pulled her back up, securing her to the branch once more. He did not let her go, even as the tree began to tilt. The wargs had shaken the tree so hard that its roots had been upturned and the tree began to fall.

Thorin yelled at the hobbit and Balin to jump the next tree at the two collided. More trees fell, forcing the others to leap like squirrels to the next perch, just to escape their fate bellow. Marie would have once found this an exciting game in her youth, now it was terrifying.

The only tree that did not fall was the very last tree on the cliff, and heavens forbid it should tip over and send the company of dwarves, the hobbit and the wizard to their deaths.

The wargs swarmed and one by one stared clawing at the base, digging up the roots.

"Gandalf!" Marie heard Bofur from up above her, "What do we do!?"

Marie looked up since it was better than looking down and watched the wizard pluck a single pine cone from the tree. He brought it close to his staff blew on it, sending tiny flecks of fire flying. The pine cone caught light and Gandalf threw it towards the wargs.

The small fire ball whizzed through the air and landed in the scattered remnants of the destruction the wargs had caused. Fire broke out and consumed the fallen trees, while the wargs howled and ran back to escape the hungry flames.

"Fili, Nori!" Gandalf called and tossed down two red hot pine cones. The dwarves caught them and found more to light. The darkness lifted as the fire grew and grew as more fireballs were thrown
down at the enemy. Marie plucked one for herself, "Here Marie." Kili put his to Marie's and the two began to sizzle and crack from the heat. It hurt Marie's hands, so much that she had to toss the flaming cone without looking where it was aimed. It hit a warg on the snout and sent it running with its tail between its legs.

"Nice one Marie!" Kili laughed.

A wall of fire now separated the company from the orc pack, the wargs fearing the heat and flames. Marie could see the scowling face of Azog as the pack retreated.

The dwarves sheered for their victory, but all the shaking from their celebrating was more than the tree could take. The brittle stone of the cliff's edge cracked and the tall pine tipped further and further over and until it was almost horizontal.

The dwarves and Marie dangled helplessly, Ori's branch broke and he was forced to cling to Dori's boot. "Mr Gandalf!" He called out to the wizard. All Gandalf could do was hold out his staff for Dori to take hold of.

Marie tried to pull herself up further onto the trunk, "Balin are you alright?" She looked across at him. He was caught between two smaller branched, one move and they would have snapped.

"Been in worse." He huffed.

"Thorin are you ...?" Marie asked, but when she turned to look at him, she fell into silence.

Thorin was rising up slowly, he gaze fixed on the Pale Orc and his steed. He unsheathed his elvish sword, the blade singing louder and clearer than ever before.

Marie had seen Thorin frustrated, she had seen him angry, even enraged. But never had she seen someone so filled with pure hate, his eyes were no longer the hue of the sky but the color of the flames. He hooked his oak shield onto his free arm and Marie just knew something horrible was about to take place.

Thorin stood and began a slow decent down the pine trunk. His momentum picked up as he neared the flames and the giant. Azog sat with his arm open, welcoming the challenge with an evil grin.

'What is he doing?' Marie feared for the dwarf king as revenge finally held full sway over him, his sword raised high above him as he launched himself at Azog.

'No Thorin. Don't ... it's not an even fight.'

The orc kicked his white warg and the beast leapt off the boulder. With one massive paw, it knocked Thorin onto his back as it passed over him. Marie felt her chest clench tightly, like she had been the one struck by the warg.

Thorin was stunned only for a moment, but his struggle to get to his feet proved too long. Azog's beast turned and made for another pass, the giant orc swinging his mace into Thorin's chest. The sound of metal colliding with flesh spurred the company to try and move to held their leader, but the tree shook more and more and branched split left and right.


While she argued with herself, the warg trapped Thorin in its jaw, sinking its teeth further into its prey. Thorin's cries of pain made were like a blade being jammed into Marie's stomach, her breathing quicken with every passing second she watched the warg clamp down harder onto
Thorin.
‘I can't ... I can't do anything. Mariellena Baggins, for once in your life do something!’

Thorin struck the beast's snout, and in return the warg tossed him against the rocks like a discarded doll.

Marie wanted to call out his name, her voice was lost.

"Bring me the dwarf's head." Azog ordered an orc prowling behind him.

'Stand up.'

Marie moved as the orc did, standing tall on the trunk.

'Draw your sword.'

The glowing blade seemed brighter than before as she pulled it free. The orc took its time approaching Thorin, like it was enjoying his inability to move or reach his sword.

'Run ... Run!'

Marie moved one foot, then the other, and she ran. She ran faster than ever before. She passed through flames and did not feel the heat, she trampled through broken branches and cared not for splinters.

Just as the foul creature raised up its curved blade to complete the deed, Marie's tiny body slammed into its side and knocked it clean off its feet. It squealed like a pig and tried to push the hobbit off but Marie held her sword in both hands and proceeded to stab the orc's chest over and over, screaming with every thrust.

Something clicked in Marie's mind, like a rough, primal instinct buried beneath the hobbit she was. All she knew was to kill or be killed.

She finally stopped when the orc no longer moved, the light of her sword could barely be seen under all the blood as she pulled it from the corpse. She stumbled back a little and placed herself between Thorin and the pack. She held out her sword and glared at the orcs.

Azog just laughed at her attempted to scare them.

"Kill her."

The orcs and wargs moved in closer. She bared her teeth and swung her sword like an axe, but the wargs snapped back at her.

Marie braced herself, but aid finally came from the dwarves. Fili, Kili and Dwalin had managed to join the fray and went about hacking up as many wargs as they could. With this new distraction, the only one left facing Marie was Azog. She let out a weak battle cry and tried to stab the white warg, but it not knocked her to the side with one swing of its head.

Marie felt her burst of energy coming to its end, right when she really needed it.

She rolled onto her back and found Azog staring down at her. His eyes where bloodshot and bright.

"Sssssccrrrrrreeeeaaacccchhhhh!"
Marie felt a gush of wind from behind and suddenly two wargs disappeared. It took a moment for Marie's eyes to adjust, for a moment she thought she had seen an eagle. But it was too big to be an eagle.

But there it was again, swooping down from the heavens. There was another, and another. Giant eagle, wings pounding so hard that the fires swelled beneath, talons plucking up the wargs like field mice. They numbered only ten but the pack scattered once again, fleeing the eagles and the flames.

Were these friends ... or foes?

With Azog distracted, Marie crawled over to Thorin's side.

His eyes were closed and his breaths were few. Deep set cuts marred his jaw and nose, and Marie could see blood on his fur coat. Without thinking she touched the top of his raven head.

"Thorin?" She called gently, "Thorin can you hear me?"

But he gave no answers.

"Ssssscccrrrrrrreeeeaaaacccchhhhh!"

Hair blew across Marie's face and she fell backwards. An eagle had descended upon Thorin, taking hold of him and his blade in its golden claws, but the famed oak shield fell from his limp arm. Marie watch amazed and relieved as the creature took Thorin far from harm.

One by one the dwarves, both fighting or trapped on the tree, were carried off on the backs of the eagles.

'Gandalf,' Marie shook her head, 'This was your ..'"BLLAAAGHHHH"

Marie's thoughts were cut short by a very angry orc, one that was charging at her with the intent to kill. But she too was saved by the great birds, one catching her in its talons before dropping her on the back of another. The feathers helped her have less of a rough landing.

Marie gripped the bird's neck with her free hand good and tight as the aerie of eagles flew off towards into the night, leaving behind the burning pines and defeated orcs.

~*~

Azog screamed out as his prey once again evaded his. He had them in his grasp and they still slipped away.

He almost had his vengeance, the Dwarf King's skull would have completed it.

He would not escape next time.

"Follow them!" He growled. The remains of his pack meekly nodded and follow their command. His wargs stopped licking their wounds and ran into the night, whimpering like pups. They were wounded from this defeat and lacked any will to question.

"Where would the go Master?" One orc asked.
"East. Send all parties East. I want the dwarf scum alive."

If there was anything Azog had learned from this encounter, it was that Thorin Oakenshield had shown him a weakness.

It came in the form of a tiny creature with emerald eyes.

"Bring them to me alive, the Dwarf King and the Emerald Eyed Whore."

He would make them suffer, Thorin Oakenshield and his woman
For what seemed like a lifetime, Marie didn't dare to look up from the back of the eagle. Only once did she peek out from behind her hair to see the horizon turn the color indigo before burying her face back into the soft feathers, feeling the strain of every muscle it used through her cheek. The eagles had flown all through the night into the oncoming dawn, bringing them hopefully somewhere safe.

Her hands were shaking and she had to take slow even breaths to regulate her race heartbeat. She was as lively as a field mouse on the first day of spring, every one of her senses felt alert and her mind kept replaying the same moments over and over again.

She had actually killed that orc, willingly and gladly killed it.

And she had been ready to kill again ... all for the sake of protecting Thorin.

*He was in danger Marie. You did it to help, not to enjoy it. You wanted to save him ... right?*

This wild, unbalanced, passionate feeling frightened Marie, but it was passing now. Marie once again felt self control at her fingertips. She managed, with great care, to wedge her sword back into its sheath.

She felt less like a killer now.

The eagle's screech vibrated through its whole body and Marie trembled with it. Light bounced off the tip of its wing and caught in her eye. Marie didn't think twice when she sat upright to escape it.

*Has the sun already rose?*

When she opened her eyes, she witnessed the golden sphere rising over a world bathed in white and gold.

The eagle tilted and Marie got a better look at this different world, one that existed high above her own. The clouds rolled across the sky like a vast sea breaking on the peaks of the mountains, the cold wind biting at her red cheeks, the other eagles soared bellow and above her.

*Amazing.*

Marie's eyes forgot about the blinding dawn as she stared in awe at the gold cast by the sun weaving through the clouds, like veins. The Shire, in comparison to all what she saw before her, seemed so small now. Marie raised her arms little by little out to the side, letting the air currents pull and push at them like the eagle's wings. The last remnants of her nerves washed away.

*Just amazing.*

*A voice drifted on the winds, breaking Marie's trance. It was a voice drowned in fear, swelling in the gusts from the north. It called out again, louder and more desperate.*

*It was Fili's voice.*

"Thorin!"

Marie's arms dropped back to the eagle's back, and her body grew heavy. 'Thorin? He's ... he's hurt ...'
Her eyes began searching for him, but only spotted the dark silhouette of the aerie diving into the white sea and Marie thought that she would be swept off the winged creature by it. But they passed through like ships in the mist.

The light was stronger when they broke through the clouds. The aerie glided over forest covered mountains, moving with the shapes and curves. Marie caught sight of Gandalf’s pointed hat pass under her, and thought she had seen Dwalin encased in his eagle’s talons as they turned. The aerie looked to be heading towards a lone stone eyot that sat on the edge of the mountains. They circled it, and Marie was close to slipping at the current angle she was on. One eagle gracefully landed on the flat surface of the eyot’s peak, a limp figure slipping from its talons before it took off again. The figure did not move.

‘Thorin.’

The largest of the eagles was next to land, and Gandalf dismounted it was haste to rush to the fallen dwarf.

Marie’s eagle carried her to the eyot next, talons gripping the ancient rock with ease. It lowered its neck to allow the hobbit to slide off safely. Marie began to run to Gandalf, but resisted. Thorin was so still that one may have thought that he was a corpse, which sent nauseous waves of recognition through her. This overwhelming sense of loss ...

She could only watch and hope that the wizard may yet save Thorin.

Marie could not see the wizard's face from under his hat and beard but his hand hovered over Thorin's face, like he was casting a spell.

The other dwarves where dropped off around their king, but Marie did not see them or their mounts flying around them. All she saw was the grey of Gandalf’s cloak and the black of Thorin's hair.

Marie's hands tightened around the cuffs of her coat.

'Please don't make me go through this again.'

Gandalf moved his hand away from Thorin's face and the dwarf finally stirred. Marie heard his sharp intake of breath.

He was alive.

Marie looked down at her feet as the breath she had been holding escaped her lips, raking her fingers through her filthy hair. She thought she heard Thorin murmur something but didn't take too much interest in it. That is until she heard her name being said.

"It's alright. Marie is here and she's quite safe." Marie looked back. Gandalf was rising to his feet as he spoke, while Kili and Dwalin were helping Thorin to his feet. But instead of welcoming the help, Thorin shrugged away his nephew and comrade.

His eyes fixed on Marie.

"You. What where you doing?" He growled. "You nearly got yourself kill."

Marie glanced at Gandalf, but he just stayed silent and off to the side. The company stayed well out of this brewing conflict as well. Marie knew she was on her own with this one.

"Did I not say that you would be a burden?" Thorin approached her like a hunter, and all Marie
could do was stand her ground. "That you had no place in the wild? No place amongst us?"

'That you did.' Was what Marie wanted to say, but thought it would be wiser to say nothing and kept her eye downward. She mentally prepared herself for another speech on who inadequate she was in the company and how useless she was.

What he said next however shocked everyone.

"I have never been so wrong in all my life."

His voice changed from its harshness to an emotional solace, and Marie was enveloped in his arms. At first Marie did not know how to react, but the realization of what this meant made her heart thump in her chest.

Even the dwarves and Gandalf understood that this moment signified Marie's complete acceptance into the company, now that Thorin had finally come round. Gandalf nodded in approval while the dwarves gave a little cheer.

What they couldn't see was just how tight he held the little hobbit. Marie thought that he could squeeze the life out of her if he chose to.

She had never been held so strongly before by anyone, and never had she felt so safe.

It seemed only right to return his hug, but maybe not as hard as his. Marie's arms barely reached around his broad frame and her face was buried in his should. The familiar scent of iron and wood made her cheeks flush but thankfully no one saw it.

The moments passed by quickly and at last Thorin released her, resting his hands on her slight shoulders as he looked her in the eye. "I am sorry I doubted you." He said. Marie believed the sincerity of it and just shrugged.

"It's alright. Perfectly normal for you to do so. I'm not a warrior ... or a burglar."

A gentle chuckle run through the company, but Thorin just smiled at her. Marie had never seen him smile before, but she thought it suited him far better than a scowl. It even made him more handsome.

'Handsome? Since when did ...?'

"Sssssccccrrrrreeeeaaaacccchhhhhhh!"

The eagles let out a chorus of cries as they fly off to the north. The company turned to watch the great beasts become dark specks in the sky.

Marie glanced back at Thorin, but the dwarf was staring at something behind her. Whatever it was, it had his attention completely and Marie was keen to know what. She followed his eyes and saw, far in the distance a dark shape rising up.

"Is that what I think it is?" She asked. Soon all the dwarves and Gandalf were looking. Thorin stepped closer to the edge of the eyot and Marie could detect a slight limp in his walk. He was still injured and need of attention, but for now all that mattered was what they could see in the east.

A single peak.

"Erebor. The Lonely Mountain and last of the great Dwarf Kingdoms of Middle Earth." Gandalf
"Our home." Thorin added with pride.

"A raven!" Oin cried from the back, pointing to the pass bird as it headed east. "The birds are returning to the mountain."

Marie stifled her laughter when she saw what bird it was.

"That my dear Oin is a thrush." Gandalf corrected the old dwarf.

"We'll take it as a sign." Thorin looked down Marie, who stood at his side, "A good omen."

"Your right." Marie nodded and hooked her thumbs into her waistcoat pockets. The tip of her thumb traced the cool band of gold hidden there, and Marie was filled with newfound confidence. "I do believe the worst is behind us."
A Brief Interlude of Peace

Marie hand stopped moving mid way through a sentence, and she almost spoiled the page with an ink blot.

'I hope he's alright.'

It had been two months since her 'disappearance' from her party and the Shire, two months since Lord Elrond welcomed her to stay at Rivendell for as long as she pleased, and two months since she had begun her book.

A change of scenery was just what she needed to feed her writing and what better place than Rivendell. She had no unwanted distant relations looking to curry favor from her, no odd looks from her elder peers whispering 'crack pot' when they thought she couldn't hear and more importantly, no Sackville-Bagginses.

Marie had spent her days lost in the ethereal air of the elven halls as she penned her story or idly chatted with her host. But not that day, or the day before that.

The peace she had managed to find had come to a grinding halt when Elrond's daughter Lady Arwen came galloping into the Hidden Valley on her white steed like she had an entire orc army on her tail, her face flushed and clutching Frodo tightly to her chest.

Her poor, sweet Frodo, caught between life and the darkness. Marie had wept the whole night when she had learned what had happened.

Her hovering hand began to ache terribly and she was forced to place her quill down. She rubbed the tender joint until some of the pain faded. This had become more frequent.

Marie sighed and the picked the quill once again, dipping in the ink pot. The dripping wax from the candles had pooled around it, binding it to the desk.

'Concentrate Marie. Frodo will be fine. He is in Elrond's hands.' She settled back into the comfort of her writing, letting the sound of the quill scratching on paper try and soothe her worried soul.

Another candle hissed as it burnt out as the voices of two elven maids drifted on the wind, flowing together to create a haunting melody that called Marie's thoughts away from her story again.

"A Elbereth Gilthoniel, silivren penna miriel o menel aglar elenath, na-chaered palan diriel"

Marie gave up trying and placed the quill back down. 'No use in trying to force it out. Let it come to you.' She pulled her blue shawl tighter around herself and meditated.

"O galadhremmin ennorath nef aer, sí aeron, Fanuilos, le linnathon Nef aer, sí aeron!"

She had to see Frodo at least once to calm her thoughts. The old hobbit slowly rose from her seat, faltering a little as her stiff bones realigned. "Oh dear." Her fingers curl around the desk's edge as
she braced against the wood. Age had finally caught up with Marie during her stay, limiting her daily walks to short steps to and from her favorite spot in the garden. Some days were better than others, but today was a very bad day.

She cautiously walked to the base of her bed and grabbed the cane resting against it. Marie found it humiliating to be in need of such a thing, but as her body grew more decrepit her pride had to be put aside.

"A Elbereth Gilthoniel
o menel palan-diriel,
le nallon sí di'nguruthos!
A tiro nin, Fanuilos!"

The last notes of the elves' hymn faded like the sunlight as night took hold of the valley. Marie followed the soft lights of the lily lamps as she left her room. Her trek was slow, and a touch painful for her legs, though the sounds of her footsteps and the tapping of the cane did create an unusually catchy rhythm, that was enough to distract her from the pain. When she finally arrived, light was still streaming through from the cracked door. Marie rapped her knuckles on the smooth surface before pushing it open.

"Yes? Oh, Mrs Baggins." Samwise Gamgee was sitting by the bed side, hovering over Frodo's sleeping frame like a hawk.

"Good evening Sam." Marie said and gave the young hobbit a tender smile. She could always expect Sam to be by Frodo's side. The source of the light was a single lamp, which illuminated the usually white room and turned it the colour of rich honey. "Have you gotten any sleep?"

"I'm not tired."

"Then what are those circles under your eyes?" Marie pointed her cane at him, "I'm old, not blind and you are in need of rest Samwise."

He looked between his friend and Marie. "But ... Mr Frodo ...

"Is in capable hands. Lord Elrond would never allow Frodo to come to any further harm. He knows that he faces my wrath should that happen." There was a sliver of truth in her idle threat. She walked over to the bed and Sam immediately jumped to his feet to offer a hand. 'Always a gentleman.'

"Go and sleep dear boy." Marie patted his arm. "If Frodo wakes up, I promise you'll be the first to know." Sam's mouth started to twitch nervously before he gave a simple nod. He shuffled out of the room and Marie took his place in the chair. Frodo was propped up on the silk cushions with the blankets pulled up to his waist. His chest rose and fell at a healthy pace but Marie did not like the lack of color in his face, it made him appear much older.

Marie retched across the bed and placed her hand over his. Frodo stirred and a pained sigh escaped his lips, but he remained asleep. "My poor boy," She murmured and rubbed her thumb against his cool skin, "What have I done to you." A small voice told her that Frodo came to harm because she had left him alone, that she wasn't there to protect him like she had promised. Yes, this would have never happened ... if she hadn't left him that ring.

That precious ring of hers ... perhaps if ...

'No. Stop it Marie.' She felt every muscle in her coil, 'You don't need it. You don't.' Marie closed her
eyes took a deep breath to release the tension, ‘You are here for Frodo. He needs you.’

Frodo gave another wheezy cough as Marie took the small cup from his hand. "That's disgusting Aunt Marie." He moaned. Marie just chuckled at the young boy, "A small price to pay to get better." Marie felt his forehead, still clammy to the touch.

"Your temperature has gone down a little." She poured more of the thick green liquid, "Now one more."

"Another?" The child reluctantly took the cup scrunched up his small face as his gulped down the medicine.

In Marie's mind it was better to be safe than sorry. Frodo coughed up a mouthful of the medicine back into the cup and hunched over in pain. "Alright, just breathe Frodo." Marie removed the cup and rubbed his back, "If it needs to come out let it."

Frodo tried to take a deep breath but ended up just coughing harder. The small fit sapped what little energy the boy had left and he fell back on his bed exhausted. "Stupid cold."

"I warned you Frodo, swimming in the middle of autumn will always result in a cold." Marie stood up and walked over to the small hearth to stoke it, "Trust me I've had more than enough experience," She quietly added on. The burning wood popped and sent tiny flecks of embers as Marie added extra timber to the hearth.

"But Merry and Pip were swimming too and they didn't get sick." Frodo said with a huff, "And it was their idea."

"It matters little now," Marie sighed. "Now, time for bed." Frodo wriggled into the sheets until he was almost parallel, his dark hair sticking out against the pillow. Marie tucked him in extra tight to help prevent the chills coming back.

"Aunt Marie, could you tell me another story? Please?"

"Not tonight my boy. You need to sleep."

"But I'm not sleepy."

Marie smiled, "Just close your eyes." Frodo did as he was told, but squeezed his eyelids together tightly. Marie brushed her fingers across his forehead over and over until the tightness eased. She leaned in a little closer and began to croon softly.

"Upon the hearth the fire is red,  
Beneath the roof there is a bed,  
But not yet weary are our feet,  
Still around the corner we may meet"

Frodo snuggled his head as he suppressed a small cough, but relaxed at the sound of her voice.

"A sudden tree or standing stone  
That none have seen but we alone.  
Tree and flower and leaf and grass,  
Let them pass. Let them pass.  
Hill and water under sky,  
Pass them by. Pass them by."
She kept singing to him, even long after he had succumbed to his own fatigue and her gentle touch.

Those memories were as warm as the embers that once burned in the many hearths of Bag End. Marie tightened her grip on Frodo's hand, afraid that he would be snatched away from her. She quietly sang in a broken voice.

"Mist and twilight, cloud and shade,
Away shall fade. Away shall fade.
Fire and lamp, and meat and bread,
And to bed. And then to bed."
There was a pair of green eyes looking up at Marie from the still water. She knew them to be her own but it took her a moment realize that, for surrounding them was tired face, paled from lake of sleep and coated in blood. This was not the hobbit that left the Shire in such a hurry.

The company had stopped for a moment's rest after the long climb down the eyot, which Gandalf had called Carrock, and the long trek through the day and the night. The will to put as many leagues as they could between them and Azog's orc pack push the need for sleep from their minds, but the first light of the second day they stopped. Many of the dwarves needed to account for the lost provisions and weapons, not to mentions what course to take now that they had crossed the mountains.

"Oh me poor back." Gloin groaned from his seat on a boulder he shared with his brother Oin, "That tumble in the mines did something in, I can feel it."

There was a communal groan of agreement as the older dwarves felt the same pain, while the youngster carried on quietly as look outs.

Marie reached down into the puddle and cupped a handful of water, not to drink but to clean her face with. The feeling of the blood cracking every time she moved her cheeks was unnerving and unpleasant. The water drained slowly between her fingers and her bandages absorbed it to form a makeshift sloth. She first padded her hand across the small gash just above her right ear. It stung only a little as she wiped away her blood.

"If we make for the Greenwood, we can cut right through and be at Esgaroth within a week." Marie looked behind her to watch the interaction between Balin and Thorin, with her own eagerness of finding out the plan brewing.

"We risk too much on that path and the Wood Elves will be onto us as soon as we step foot into that place." Thorin shook his head, "No we should head further South, away from his domain."

"His? Whose realm?" Marie thought, her hand resting against her ear as she forgot what she was doing.

"We are limited in both options and time," Gandalf cut in between to dwarves, "Balin is right, the Elven Path will take us straight to the desired path."

Thorin did not take to this plan well, and his face twisted in pain. He raised a hand to his side where he had been wounded by the warg. Marie was worried, he hadn't had his injuries seen to yet and they would only get worse.

Balin had seen his friend's pain and gripped his good shoulder, "Thorin, it does not suit me either to ..." The old dwarf went silent all of a sudden and looked uneasy. Thorin saw it and looked around. "What is it?"

One by one the dwarves looked up at Thorin with a sense of worry. Marie wet hand dropped as she finally heard it, the distant howling. 'It can't be." She muttered.

"Our pursuers have finally caught up with us." Gandalf walked over to the base of the mountain they had taken refuge at. The dwarves huddled together in a defensive circle, which Marie noticed was their general plan in these situations.
Kili parted from his brother and pulled Marie to her feet, "Here Marie." He pulled her into the safety of the circle. Marie had notice him becoming quite protective of her since her dramatic return from the depths of Moria, more so than the rest of the company.

"How did they find us?" Dwalin gripped the handle of his hammer tightly. "They haven't yet." Gandalf turned, sending his cloak whirling around himself. "We still have a chance to outrun them."

"They could be miles away still." Dori said hopefully but Thorin did not believe that, "Or right on top of us, we don't know."

"Not yet." Gandalf raised a bushy eyebrow in the direction of the she-hobbit, "Perhaps our burglar could do some scouting."

"Mm? What?" Marie pointed to herself, "Me?"

"Yes Marie," Gandalf reached into the circle and pulled her away from her companions, "Take this path up the peak, use the rocks to take cover." He pointed up a steep passage that curved into the side of the mountain.

"Gandalf, I'm not sure if you've noticed but I'm covered in goblin blood." Marie pointed to the black mess that caked her left cheek and stuck her hair to her face.

"That is good, it will cover your scent."

"And if it doesn't?"

Gandalf bent down a little lower and whispered, "Then be prepared to run, fast."

Marie couldn't believe the wizard at times, but it didn't look like she had much say in the matter and she began her climb up the mountain. "Miss Baggins." Marie stopped and looked back at Thorin. His brow was deeply lined, "Should see any sign of the pack ... or of Azog, return at once."

Marie nodded and continued on her way. The path felt well worn and her feet found no trouble during the climb. Someone had used the path frequently or it was game trail for animals. As she neared the peek the dirt became stone and she could hear her feet padding along granite surface. The howls grew in volume as she peeked over the rocks, yet she could not see any sign of the wargs. All she saw was a purple colored sky with the first teasing signs of daylight behind the mountains. If was a beautiful sight to behold, until Marie finally caught movement from the mountain. It was just one warg she saw, but it did not take long for the rest of the pack to appear. The wargs sniffed fiercely for the trail, or lack of one, and were crossing over the peak. One warg stood out from the rest and Marie pressed against the rock. She recognized the beast and his rider, Azog the Defiler.

Marie could still hear his blood curdling scream from their escape and the blood shot eyes glaring down at her. It made her skin crawl and she snuck low behind the rock.

Her pointed ears detected another sound on the air, but it was much closer than the wargs. She kept low and looked to her left. There, not far from her, stood a large black beast. It rested it's meaty paws on a boulder and was watching the pack as she was, its heavy panting filled the air and Marie began to panic. If it smelt her it would be onto her in mere seconds. If the pack wasn't enough to worry about now there was this thing to worry about. She slid herself out from hiding and launched herself back down the path, but the vibrations from the black beast's roar nearly knocked her over.

She ran down hill so fast she had to steady herself on the rocks. At the bottom of the path the
dwarves stood waiting, arms at the ready for a fight. Marie skidded to a halt to avoid being impaled by Orcist. "How close is the pack?" Thorin asked.

"No more than three leagues." Marie puffed out. "We have another problem though."

"Did they see you Marie? They saw you." Gandalf pressed her for answers. Marie bent over to catch her breath, "No they didn't"

Gandalf looked awfully pleased with himself, "See what did I tell you, quiet as a mouse." He said to the dwarves, who all agreed with grins, "Perfect burglar material I must say."

"I am flattered but," Marie raised her voice over all the mumbling, "There is something else out there and it is much closer than the pack." That silence the company.

"What form did it take? Like a bear?"

Marie cocked her head at the wizard, "Yes. Yes it did, only much, much bigger. How did ...?"

"You knew about this?" Bofur cut her off, "I say we double back."

"And be run down by a pack of orcs?" Thorin had a point.

"There is a house. It's not far from here, we could find refuge perhaps." Gandalf was staring off into the south. Marie could see hesitation behind all the hair.

"Whose house? Are they friend or foe?" Thorin growled.

"Neither. He will help us or he will kill us."

"What choice do we have?"

"None."

Another great roar bellowed from behind the company and all the dwarves and Marie turned to it. It was closer now. It sounded angrier.

"Quickly all of you, this way." Gandalf was the first to take off, then one by one the dwarves followed after, keeping their weapons out.

~*~

They ran on through the forest until the sun had finally reached the middle of the sky, that is when the howling of the pack was heard along with the bear.

"Where is this house Gandalf?!" Nori shouted from the back of the group, but the wizard did not respond. The bear was catching up to them faster and was growing even fiercer to Marie. She alone knew what shape the beast was and the image of it running them down was enough to keep her already tired legs moving.

"This way, run!" Gandalf made for a clearing in the forest. Marie thought it was a bad decision to run out into the open, until she saw a large thatched house nestled in a small forest island in the middle of the glen. "Into the house!"
They ran with all speed as if the very gates of the Lonely Mountain were open and waiting for them with a might feast. They passed through the wooden gateway and crashing into the massive door to the house. Marie stopped at the gate to catch her breath and look back. The black bear burst through the forest, taking out a tree of two as he did and Marie found herself running again. The dwarves were so anxious to get in that only Thorin had any sense to unlock the latch. The doors opened and they flooded in, Marie pushing Balin in before her.

"Come on lads push!" Dwalin spurred them on to shut the doors as the black mass of muscle came closer. Just as the two doors met, there came a great crash as the bear hit them. Marie saw a scarred muzzle pushed though and a set of sharp teeth to go along with it, roaring and snapping to get in. Marie stepped back into Gandalf's staff as the dwarves pushed the door close and successfully keep the bear on the outside.

"What is that?" Ori squeaked.

"That is our host."

Marie stared up and Gandalf with utmost confusion. Their host was a bear?

"His name is Beorn, and he is a skin changer. Sometimes he is a huge black bear, and sometimes his is a great strong man."

"Skin changer? I thought they were just things of folk tales." Marie said.

"No my dear Marie, they were as real as you or I." Gandalf began to pace. Marie noticed a small herd of cows calmly huddled in the huge wooden house, in fact everything was huge, from the chairs to the fireplace. The dwarves began to spread out and explore the skin changer's dwellings. "The bear is unpredictable but the man can be reasoned with. However he is not over fond of dwarves." Gandalf warned them. Gloin and Oin gave each other a worried look. "Get some rest, all of you. You'll be safe here tonight."

Marie came away from the door to find some comfort in the strange house. Balin and Kili surveyed the food they had access to, but found mostly wheat and berries. "Someone get water." Thorin ordered. "Aye, my throat is as dry as bone. An ale would do nicely." Marie heard Bofur from the other side of the hall. "Careful now. Don't break anything." Dori said frantically. "Where is the meat?" Bombur was digging through the cupboard.

Marie walked over to a table where a beautiful chess set was laid out. All the pieces were made from dark pine wood and where carved in the form of animals. A thin layer of dust floated up as she touched the smooth surface and tickled her nose. She whipped it on a sleeve and came to realize that she was starting to smell, quite bad actually.

"Here." A large bucket was thrust before her, half full of clean water and a rag hanging off the side. Marie glanced at the hand holding the bucket, then followed up the arm until she came Thorin's face. "Get yourself cleaned. Stay inside."

Marie took the bucket from him, though it was twice the size of any normal one for her. "Thank you."

Thorin began to say something else but Oin tugged him away, "Come on Thorin, let's have a look at those wounds."

It eased Marie's conscious to know that Thorin's wounds were being cleaned and bound. She tightened her grip on the bucket and looked for a quiet spot to wash, which was not easy since the
dwarves were taking up much of the house. Marie had no choice but to venture in between the cow and to the far corner of a forgotten pen, a small board of wood served as her guard.

It had been so long since Marie had even thought to wash. It would be nice to be rid of the goblin blood once and for all. She first removed the shredded bandages from her hands for they had served their purpose. Her hands were now covered in tiny scars. Next she removed her coat and waistcoat, the once fine garment was now ruined and not worth keeping. Before she threw it over the board she remembered her new ring, still safe in the pocket. She plucked it out and popped it into her pack pants pocket, there it would be safe with her acorn button.

She peered over at the company warily before unbuttoning her shirt. She may have trusted them, but they were still men and she was still a woman. She sunk to her knees and peeled the white garment from her skin, leaving only her felt pants and bodice to shield her. She dunked the cloth into the water and began cleaning herself properly. She let the sound of the dwarves talking mingle into a soft single murmur playing in the back of her mind. Bofur had started to sing, but in a mush docile tone than usual. Unlike before she had time to enjoy the sensation of water dripping down her forearms, to press her face into the cloth to cool her skin, all of it sweet relief it brought her running water across her bare shoulders. The water grew darker with filth and Marie's skin now glistened. She draped the damp cloth on the bucket and cupped great handfuls of water, dosing her long locks with it. She pulled her wet hair over her should and pulled at the knots. Twigs and dried blood stuck to the curls and it was no easy task to pick them out, but Marie found she had entered into a calm state of mind and it did not bother her to do so.

She combed her fingers through the relatively clean hair over and over, but something made her tense up. She was overcome with the sense of being watched.

"Um ... Marie?"

The hobbit almost died from embarrassment and snatch her shirt. "Kili, for goodness sake!" She hastily threw the shirt around herself and pulled it tight across her chest.

"I'm agh, I'm mean I ... agh I." Kili tried to speak but her had forgotten how.

"Warn me next time." She glared up at the youth, whose cheeks and ears had turned crimson as he stood gawking at her.

"There's food. I mean we have ... you know. Sorry." Kili hung his head in shame.

"Right. Thank you, just give me a moment."

But Kili did not move, and was peeking out under his messy hair. It wasn't until a large hand with armor plates came crashing down on his shoulder did he move. "Right lad. Come on." Dwalin yanked Kili away. Marie let out a sigh of relief and listened to what followed.

"Kili what were you doing?" She picked up Fili's disapproving voice.

"It's not like that I was ... OW! Uncle!"

Somehow the image of Thorin scolding Kili was enough to make Marie giggle, but she did so quietly.
The Lament of Alistair Took

It was too quiet for Marie. The dwarves were not ones to sit by idly at a meal without at least one food fight, but now they just sat around the large table quietly picking at what they allowed themselves to take from their host, which was little more than nuts, berries and few slices of cheese. Marie guessed that the lack of substantial delicacies like pork and chicken was the cause of such a sombre mood, that or the thought of the orc pack still pursuing them.

Marie stood by the fire they had built and watched over the simmering pot of milk. She felt she could at least attempt to make something for the company. Gandalf had made himself comfortable on a stool by the fireplace, and had withdrawn behind the thin veil of smoke emanating from his own long pipe, his grey gaze staring of into a world unseen by the ordinary eye. This didn't feel right to Marie, which surprised her since only months ago she would have wished for nothing more than peace and quiet while she sat at the dinner table. It was clear now just how far the dwarves had wormed the way into Marie's life, where the reckless manners and boisterous lust for food and song now reassured her of her companions' well being instead of repulsing her.

"Could we perhaps make an escape now, with the night to hide us?" Ori whispered to Fili and Kili from across the table. Marie glanced over her shoulder at the youths as she broke up pieces of honeycombs.

"Maybe, but it's the bear that is the problem." Fili knocked his knuckles on the wood.

"If we are quiet, we could make it into the woods at least."

"You always have been bold Ori."

"Perhaps too bold." Dwalin, who had long given up eating at the table, stood behind the scheming youths. "Has this quest taught you nothing? Other than the vulgarity of goblins or to gawk at a woman." This was a purposeful jab at Kili, who had received nothing but reminders of his minor fault that day. He still could not meet Marie's gaze and keep his head down.

She turned back to the pot and mixed in the honeycomb and milk, stirring it carefully with giant ladle. Bombur came up next to her, "I only found a little bit Miss Marie. Will it be enough?" He handed her a small piece of ginger like she had asked him to locate. "More than enough. Thank you." She took it and pulled the pot away from the fire, so the milk would not burn. "I was only going to use a single piece anyway. I don't know how this will turn out with goat's milk."

She cut a small sliver from the plant and dropped it into the mix to infuse it. Bombur leaned over and sniffed it, "What is that exactly?"

"Just a little something my mother used to make. It's good to help stave off illness and makes for an evening treat." Marie pushed the pot back over the flames, the smell of ginger hitting her hard. "I hope I've remember it correctly. It's been years, not since ..." Marie fell quiet when she remembered.

"Miss Marie?" Bombur tapped her shoulder gently.

"It's nothing. Nothing at all." Marie feigned a smile

"Shall I find some cups?"

"Yes please. If you can, small ones."
Bombur went back to searching while Marie picked up the ladle and stirred.

"Here." Bofur pulled out his tobacco poach and pipe. "Since we can't find comfort in warmth or ale."

"Aye, that would do just fine." Nori stood up and crossed around to take a pinch. "Alright go easy. There's not much left." Bofur handed out an equal share to Nori, Fili, Balin and Thorin and soon even more smoke filled the house.

"How about a song Bofur?" Balin suggested, "It would be worth more than the belting of goats."

"Aye but use is a song with meed?"

Another roar came from the outside.

"He's at it again." Dori said. An uncomfortable silence befell the again as they all waited to hear what came after, and only ended thanks to Thorin. "Come Bofur, a song."

Bomber returned with what appeared to be feeding bowls the size of a normal dinner plate. "No cups?" Marie whispered to him, and he shook his head. "They'll do the trick." Marie scooped up some of the liquid and sipped it. It wasn't a disaster like she had feared. "Try this." She offered the dwarf, who gladly gulped it down. His face lit up and he gave Marie his silent but delighted approval.

"The world world was young,  
The mountains green,  
No stain yet on the Moon was seen,"

Marie paused for a moment as the first few notes of Bofur's song filled the air.

"No words were laid on stream or stone,  
When Durin woke and walked alone.  
He named the nameless hills and dells.  
He drank from yet untasted wells,  
He stooped and looked in Mirrormere,  
And saw a crown of stars appear,  
As gems upon a silver thread,  
Above the shadow of his head."

It didn't sound like one the upbeat dwarf would sing, but at the same time his voice felt perfect for it. It shifted the dull atmosphere to something more cosy like. Oin and Nori kept the rhythm by tapping the table with spoons. The hobbit poured the drink into the bowls and she and Bombur passed them out amongst the others.

"Gandalf?" Marie gave the wizard a light tap to wake him. He coughed out smoke as his trance was broken. "Mm, umm. Oh why thank you Marie." He took the bowl graciously. He sipped it and grinned. "This is your mother's Honey Milk isn't it?"

"With my own little twist."

"It's delightful Marie." Gandalf raised it to toast her. Marie smiled and continued to hand out the drink.

"But still the sunken stars appear  
In dark and windless Mirrormere;"
There lies his crown in water deep, 
Till Durin wakes again from sleep.”

As Bofur came to the end of his song, Marie placed a bowl in his hand, "That was lovely." She said. "Thank you. And what may I ask is this?" He eyes the gold coloured milk curiously.

"Just something to drink. I know it's not ale or brandy, but it's .."

"It's great." Kili said rather loudly. Both Marie and Bofur turned as one to the young dwarf. "I mean it's really nice Marie." He ducked his head backed down. "Thank you Kili." Marie said politely, only making it worse for Kili as he buried his face into the bowl. Fili smirked at his little brother and patted his back.

Soon all but two of the dwarves were sipping away at the Honey Milk, Bombur helped himself to the rest of the pot and there was a demand for another song from the toy maker. Marie held the last two bowls in each hand to pass to Dwalin and Thorin. She found Dwalin standing apart from the group, but could see Thorin, though she swore he had just been standing right next to Dwalin. "My thanks lass." Dwalin muttered and downed the drink in one go. But Marie didn't hear him, she was looking in the shadows for the missing king.

Dwalin placed his hand on Marie's shoulder, careful not to knock her over with his strength, "He's outside." He told her in a voice so low, it could have been mistaken for a growl. With one look she thanked him and slipped into the shadows herself.

The front door to the house was still bared so Marie looked for another exit. She crept deeper into the house, bumping into more goat and a few stray chickens who clucked their annoyance at her. Marie found what she was looking for when she saw a thin strip of pale light streaming in from somewhere. It was a small side door built into another pair of barn doors, and it was open.

'So much for staying inside.' Marie sighed and stepped through the door.

It wasn't dark as Marie had expected it to be. A shroud of mist had descended and had completely enveloped the sky and glen, it was so thick Marie could barely make out the shapes in front of her. Of in the distance, the groans and cries of the black bear could be heard still. She looked up to find the stars but only the moonlight made it through the mist, giving it a blue hue. It was like early morning in the winter in the Shire, when the trees were bare and droplets of rain lined the like diamonds. Marie breathed out slowly and watched it freeze and roll from her lips, becoming one with mist.

"You shouldn't be out here."

She turned sharply and almost spilt the hot drank. Thorin was sitting on a stray log that had long since tumbled out from a pile and had been consumed by the ivy that grew all over the house. He was clutching his pipe as usual, letting the smoke dance across his eyes. Her fright was quickly forgotten once she saw him. "Wouldn't your rules apply to you as well?"

Thorin took a deep breath in to speak, but it looked as though it pained him to do so and slowly he let out a deep groan. Marie became worried and took a step towards him. "Are your wounds ...?"

"It is nothing. It will pass."

Marie forced herself to believe him, for there would be no use trying to tell him otherwise. His will was too strong, as was his pride. That was why he sat alone, he did not wish the others to see him in pain.
"What is it that you want?" Thorin lifted his face a little, and Marie could not but be transfixed for a moment. The pale light illuminated his face, which appeared ashen and tense yet still proud as always, like cold stone. The only life to be found was in his eyes, which the blue hue of the moon increased to a brilliant shine. Marie remembered her wits and held out the bowl, "I just came to see if," She pried her gaze from those eyes and looked sheepishly at the milk, "If you would like some." She took and another step and held out the bowl.

Thorin stared at the bowl for a long time and Marie thought he would not take it, but sure enough he reached up and graciously accepted it. He sipped it wordlessly and Marie felt a rush of joy as she back away, ready to return to the warmth of the house.

"I want to know something." Thorin said and Marie froze to the spot. "You had a chance to escape, to return to your home. Yet you did not, you came after us and have stayed with us."

Marie lips became a hard frown and she tried to turn away. "Let's just ... forget about our spat in the cave shall we? I was being emotion and irrational thoughts led to my decision. I'm sorry so let's ..."

"I want to know." Thorin repeated himself, "Why did you come back?" There was a softness to his voice that calmed the hobbit, if only a little.

"I ... well where to start?" Marie scratched the back of her head. "I realised something, when I was in the Goblin tunnels. I remembered what you said about understanding what it was like, missing a home and everything. Then it dawned on me that you did, you felt my pain tenfold and I knew then I was being undeniably selfish and petty. I have home to go back to but you don't, yours was taken. I know now that the reason I came back was because I want you to get it back, and I will help you if I can." She glanced at Thorin to see his reaction. He had listened to every word she had told him and seemed moved by them. Marie felt herself grinning and she looked shyly at her hairy feet, "I always wanted adventure in my youth."

"What stopped you?" Thorin asked

Marie hesitated as old wounds from the past ached in her chest. Her voice came out no louder than a whisper. "My thirst for it died twenty five years ago, along with the one who encouraged it." Her arms wrapped around herself automatically as she waited for what the dwarf would say next. But he just looked with curiosity gleaming in his eyes. He wouldn't make her speak, but he let her if she chose to. "Who was he?" He finally asked

"I wouldn't think to laden you with my stories Master Dwarf. They're not worth much."

"Try me."

After what seemed like years of worth of silent debating, Marie dropped her arms.

"Alistair Took. A distant cousin on my mother's side. He and I did not have any siblings so we were quite close in out childhood, he was only few years older. Unlike most hobbits, Alistair had an insatiable taste for travel, always itching to escape to the world beyond our borders. And I was no better, though be less brave than he was. Every day we would run off to where ever our feet took us, over the little rivers and up into the trees, into the woods and sometimes into farmer's crops. It did not matter to us, as long as we were together. Folks thought Alistair was a bad influence on me, the already strange Baggins girl who'd climb up a tree and pick pockets, but I did not heed their words back then."

Marie found herself slowly sitting on an over grown stump as she told her tale.
"It was always Al's dream to leave the Shire. He wanted to go east to where the elves lived, to see if what the legends spoke about Rivendell were true. Then he would go further on, further than any hobbit had dared dream of. He would see all the world and return with riches no one had ever seen and new stories to tell the children. I wanted to go with him, but I was still too afraid to leave everything I had known behind. But Al was patient, and promised that when we both came of age we would go together, and even then he would wait for me to be ready."

She could see him in her mind, the gold curls just as unruly as her's, the cocksure smile he always had and the ruddy red cheeks that all Took's had. Al, her Al, devilish as he was charming made that promise with the sincerest smile.

"But it didn't matter if he did wait. The winter after he made that promise, he came down with a mild cold. We thought nothing of it, it was just a cold, but when spring passed and the coughing did not ease I couldn't help but feel uneasy. Al would just laugh it off every time I would ask him about, but I could see through his lies. As the months fade by, his strength seemed to fade with them until he could not run anymore, nor climb trees. He'd fall into fits and his face would lose all colour, and when I found blood on his handkerchief ... After that he could barely walk without collapsing. Old Took had the best healers from all over the Shire at his call, even one from Bree. They all told him the same thing, it was in his lungs. The healer from Bree called it Consumption but what we called it did not matter. He was dying and there was nothing we could do."

Marie's voice started to give way, and she paused to compose herself

"We did what we could to ... ease his pain, but no matter what he was suffering. It wasn't long before he lost all his strength. I tried to be brave for him, but in the end I would just cry ever day over the inevitable outcome and I hated myself for it. The days turned into winter once more and little by little we lost more of Al, until one day ... he didn't wake up ... ever again."

Again Marie needed to stop. Her chest felt compressed and her words felt like they were choking her. She could feel Throrin's gaze on her as she took a deep breath and went on.

"Travelling on an unfamiliar path is not the hardest part of a journey Marie, it's taking the first step forward. That's what he used to tell me all the time when I afraid. Before he died he made me swear that I would have his adventure, to not be afraid of me dreams. He made me swear ..."

"And here you are." Throrin pointed out.

Marie let out a mirthless laugh. "Here I am, twenty years too late and all of it spent on trying to be a respectable hobbit to afraid to go beyond her front door." Her eyes stung with unshed tears that she rubbed away. She had already spilt her guts to Throrin, she would not start crying too.

"You loved him dearly."

"I did."
"I think we would be very proud of you."

Marie stopped rubbing and looked at him. "You said that you were afraid, but look where you are now. Never before has a Halfling been seen these parts and I doubt none of your kin have even thought what was in the east. If you were as afraid as you believe would you have made it this far?"
There was a sincerity in his words that made Marie's chest release the tightness constricting her. "I may have doubted you once Marie, but I know now expect many things from you."

It was his smile that got her. She ducked her head and let the tears drip onto her knees.
"Thank you."
One would think that after a day and a night of running from goblins, Wargs, orcs and an angry bear, it would be easy to find sleep, but not for Marie. Her companions had all dropped like flies onto bales of hay, piles of rags and the odd shelf if they could fit, and none of them stirred. She tossed about on the tiny pile of hay she had gathered for her bed, her legs getting caught in the woolen green blanket as she did and her hair caught in her suspenders.

But Marie was restless and she didn't understand why. The only reason she could think of was the noise. Not the snoring, that she was used to, and not any of the animals. There was a sound that kept pounding in her ears. She sat up and looked around for the source of the noise, but it seemed to be coming from all around. It was a deep rumble, like the beat of and drum or a heart. It was drawing her oddly enough to her to her pocket. She couldn't resist reaching into her back pocket and pulling out the ring. It was just as alluring as it was when she had found it in the tunnels, it's strangely perfect shape felt right as she twirled it between her fingers. Marie thought that it was the magic it contained that made it so special, so tempting. A magic ring for her and her alone, a fine prospect in Marie's mind. Then she heard the whispering. It was incoherent and cut through the air like a knife.

She glanced around once more, watching for any prying eyes. The dwarves had settled themselves in somewhat of a circle, Marie between Bifur and Oin to her left, Ori, Bofur and Bombur across at her feet, Gloin and Dwalin to their right, and Thorin and Balin to Marie's. The rest littered around the circle's edge.

Once she was sure none were awake, Marie slipped the ring around her middle finger and let the heavy veil of magic cloaked her.

She expected the same unknown thrill she had first experienced the first time she had worn it, but it felt different. Her body felt heavier, more lethargic than she remembered, and her thoughts were being assaulted by the whispers that had grown into a torrent of scrapping sneers and scowls. Marie clasped her hands over her ears to block them out, but it did not work. There was movement near her feet which disrupted the shadows. It was only Ori curled up in a potato sack adjusting himself, but his slight shift sent a ripple effect all around Marie. The part of her that was always rational was screaming for her to remove the ring, but the whispers became words. Dark, painful words that stayed her hand.

The heavy weight over her lifted ever so slightly and before her very eyes, the barn floor and all the dwarves disintegrated and were replace with black stones. Marie wanted to let out a squeak but no sound came out. She watched with a mixture of horror and awe as if by some random spell had spirited her away to an ancient castle ruins. She was sitting on what looked like a long broken bridge between the towers, her new surroundings of stone walls, or what remained of them, stretched up into looming towers worn by the passage of time. Iron spikes climbed the walls in the place of weeds and Marie thought she could smell death in the air. She rolled over onto her side and found herself staring down into a large cavern that went deep into the earth. She could make out the dim flicker of lights from within the depths and the creatures lurking beneath.

Marie braced a hand on the stone, but pulled away. She had felt a pulse under her hands, and under her feet. Everywhere she touched there was sickening pulsation, like the fortress was alive.

A lone figure approached her from somewhere deep in the ruins. Marie squinted and tried to see who it was but the wisps and shadows made it difficult for her to make just who. But the harder Marie focused, the more she came to regret doing so.
Azog the Defiler walked right up to her and stopped barely three feet from her quaking form. She thought she was done for but remembered that none could see her.

Azog stood waiting for something.

"Why is he here? And more importantly why am I? And where is here?"

The pulsing beneath her quickened its pace and a black shadow pulled itself out of cracks and dark passages into the cavern and present itself Azog. Marie thought she could see the outline of a man at its center, but then nothing could be as it seemed.

"We grow in number," The shadow said, "We grow in strength." It was a terrible voice that spoke, husky and coarse with age, "You will lead my armies"

"What of Oakenshield?" Azog asked.

The shadow shifted around the giant orc, "War is coming."

This displeased Azog, "You promised me his head!"

Marie was at a loss. What was this war the shadow spoke of and Oakenshield? What part was Thorin's death to play in this plan? The shadow suddenly dispersed and advanced on Azog, and Marie. She panicked and tried in vain to pull the ring off, but her hands shook in terror. "Death comes to all. Oakenshield will fall with the East." Came a thousand whispers as the shadow passed over and Marie's hand began to burn like fire. Her eyes closed as the voices repeated, "Death comes to all."

Maire felt her heart freeze over.

She gasped wildly for air and opened her eyes. Azog was gone, and the cold ruins. She had returned to the skin changer's house, like she had never left at all.

Or had she?

She could not recall getting the ring off, but all the same it was there, sitting squarely in the palm of her shaking hand like she had never put it on. She quickly put it back into her pocket.

Beads of sweat ran down her neck as she evened out her ragged breathes but hunching over her knees. She felt so cold.

A hand touched her shoulder and she let out a tiny yelp. She scrambled to face her supposed attacker and came face to face with Thorin, awake and upright.

"Easy." It was more of a command than anything, but his hand never left her shoulder. "Calm yourself."

Marie did so, slowly until it did not hurt to breathe. She wiped away the sweat on her forehead and pulled her wild hair off her face. "Don't you ever sleep?" She hissed.

"It is hard to find rest when there is a hobbit thrashing about you next to you." Thorin said, removing his hand.

"I do believe that was sarcasm I just heard. I was not 'thrashing about' at all."

"You were. Shaking like a fever had taken you, I could feel it."
Marie's mouth went dry and she worried he had seen her little disappearing/reappearing act, but he
did not look at her suspiciously. "I ... I was only dreaming." She said. 'Yes, dreaming.'

"Are you all right right now?"

"Yes I am. Thank you." Marie paused as another question came to mind. "Thorin why is ...?" She
stopped herself when she remembered what she was asking.

Thorin's head gave a small tilt, "What? Speak your mind Marie." He might not be happy if she did.

"Why is Azog hunting you?"

Thorin's expression turned grim at the mention of his foe's name. His balled up his fist, crushing
the hay that had been caught between his fingers, "No doubt he seeks to finish what he started in
ending the line of Durin, and recompense for his cursed arm."

"I understand the reason why, but why now?" Marie tried to make the question clearer. "Why after
so many years does he hunt you now? Did you ever think that ... maybe someone else ...?"

"Why would you suspect such a thing?" Thorin asked.

"I just ... never mind." Marie pulled the green blanket back over her lower half. She was still so
very cold. "It was a dream."

"A dream about Azog." The dwarf huff, "Must have been a nightmare."

"Yes. just that." Marie turned her gaze back to Thorin.

She wanted to believe it had been a dream, otherwise the shadow's words held more sinister tones
than Marie wanted.

'Oakenshield will fall with the East.'

The seed of fear had been planted in Marie's heart.

"Marie, what is...?" Thorin never finished the question, for a long rattle came from the second barn
door. Marie and Thorin looked over at the moonlight now streaming in from the opened door.

"Get down." Thorin took hold of Marie's arm again and pushed her own into the hay. She did not
resist and folded herself up to appear smaller. Thorin's grip tightened as his leaned over her,
watching for the intruder. His black hair fell across her face and Marie had to stop herself from
flinching from his abrupt closeness.

What would her relatives back home say to this, being held by a strange dwarf as she lay there in
the dark? Her aunts would be on the verge of fits.

She focused on the large man that slowly entered. His heavy breathing sounding like the grunts of
an over worked dog. None of the animals minded this behemoth of a man, in fact Marie saw the
goats flocking around his fur covered legs.

This must have been Beorn.

Marie raised her head slightly to get a better look, but only succeeded in scraping her temple along
Thorin's jaw. The dwarf did not falter, and kept his eyes fixed on Beorn even with Marie squirming
beneath him.
"Keep still." He breathed, "We can not be sure what he will do."

Marie buried her face in her arm and shut her eyes tightly. She did not know how long she stayed like that until sleep finally came for her, but this she was certain of. Thorin kept a hold of her until she was lost to her dreams, and that the cold in her heart had faded.
For the first time in a very long time, Marie did not feel rushed to rise from her sleep. There was sunlight on her face and at long last the hay pile felt just like her comfortable bed. She rolled onto her back and her arms stretch out above her head, only to let them fall back to her sides. Her eyes did not wish to open no matter how much she willed them to, but it wasn't much of a fight. They cracked a little and Marie saw a beautiful golden light above her head.

'Just a few more minutes.' She told herself and rolled onto her other side, curling her arm under her head as she did. She was granted only a few seconds before a bee flew down and tickled at her nose. She twitched it to shake it off but it would not budge. She lazily lifted a hand to swat it away but missed as it buzzed around her face.

Marie groaned and sat up in a huff. She would have liked a nice long sleep in. She rubbed the sleep out of her eyes and patted around for her red coat. It had lost the soft texture she remembered and had taken on a far rougher feel to it thanks to the exposure to sun, hail and her least favorite, troll snot. As she slipped her arms into the jacket she looked around and found that the dwarves were already up and sitting at the table. She made herself as presentable as she could given the circumstances and made her way over.

"Good morning." Marie said. The first ones to hear her were the inseparable pair of Fili and Kili at the head of the table. "Morning," Fili said, Kili just nodded. She heard another 'good morning' from Ori at the other end of the table and a general grumble from the older dwarves who were so rigid and quiet.

Marie could see Thorin engaged in a conversation with Balin, but his back was to her.

"You there." Said a voice that frightened her out of her wits. She craned her head around the table and saw the skin changer, in all his glory, rising up from a wooden chair with bear heads carved into its back. Marie had never seen anyone so tall in her life, even the farmers from Bree seemed small in comparison to this man. He appeared more beast than man, with wild coarse hair covering most of his face like a mane, his skin was blotted and dark all over and blended in with the thick woollen jerkin he wore. Marie could see scars across his face, but they looked to have faded over time though still had not fully vanish.

He drew closer to her, his feet hitting the floor like sledgehammers.

"You are no dwarf." His voice was deep and heavy in his chest, "What are you?"

Marie straightened herself up as tall as she could, "I'm Marie Baggins, of the Shire."

He examined her carefully, "I'm not one for titles 'Marie Baggins'. What are you?"

Marie wasn't sure if he was being rude or cautious with her, but she did not see any malice in his eyes. "I'm a Hobbit."

"One of the Halflings from the West. I've heard tales of your kind but never believed them to be true." Marie turned her gaze to her feet as Beorn passed her, "You are far from your home, but for what purposes?"

Thorin had moved closer to them during their exchange and came to her aid. "She is our burglar."

"A strange choice for one." Beorn picked up a bucket and poured fresh milk into a large wooden
pitcher and said no more. Marie's attention was drawn to the broken shackle around his left wrist, the skin around it was pink with scabs.

Marie thought it best not to stare and quickly found a place at the table. Dwalin moved to accommodate her, and also to keep an eye on her. "I see that you are finally ready to join the land of living my dear Marie."

"And good morning to you too Gandalf."

Marie could hear his muffled chuckle behind her.

Thorin lent against a wooden pillar with his arms cross as he watched over the company. His eyes flitted to Marie, and she could see him speak to her through them. She wordlessly nodded to him in response to his silent greeting.

'I wonder if he got any sleep last night.'

Breakfast was no different to their meal the night before and Marie took only a slice of bread to satisfy her brewing hunger. Other than Bifur hording most of it, the dwarves very diplomatic and peaceful in dealing with the food. It was no surprise why, considering the nature of their host. No one even dared bring up the fact a whole family of mice were running around the food.

Beorn returned to fill the tankards with milk. "So you the one they call Oakenshield." He said to Thorin, "Tell me, why is Azog the Defiler hunting you?"

"You know of Azog? How?"

"My people were the first to live in the mountains, before the orcs came down from the north. The Defiler killed most of my family, but others he enslaved."

Marie's eyes once again were drawn to the shackle.

"Not for work you understand, but for sport." Beorn looked as though he would shatter the pitcher, "Caging skin changers and torturing them seemed to amuse him."

"So there are other like you?" Marie asked.

"Once there were many, now there is only one."

"I'm sorry, I didn't ..."

"You were not responsible, so there is no use in apologizing."

Marie wanted to finish speaking but saw the point in what Beorn had said, even if it had come off cold. Dwalin gave her sideways glance and shook his head, telling her to say no more.

Beorn returned to his seat once his had finished was his duties as, what Marie would describe, a reluctant host. "You need to reach the mountain before the last days of autumn." He said to the wizard.

"Before Durin's Day falls, yes."

"Then you are running out of time."

"Which is why we must go through Mirkwood."
Thorin started to pace at the mention of Mirkwood, and Marie remembered his response at Carrock to that plan.

"A darkness lies upon that forest, foul things creep beneath those trees. There is alliance between the orcs of Moria and the Necromancer in Dol Guldur."

Something in the pit of Marie's stomach churned, making her nails dig into the wooden surface.

"We will take the Elven Road, that path his still safe." Gandalf said, but Beorn scoffed. "Safe? The Wood Elves of Mirkwood are not like their kin. They are less wise and more dangerous, but it matters not."

"What do you mean?" Thorin stopped pacing and looked at the giant.

"These lands are crawling with orcs, their numbers are growing and you are on foot. You will never reach the forest alive." Beorn bluntly told him. There was a creak as Beorn stood once again, and an uncomfortable shuffle went down the line of dwarves as he passed them.

"I don't like dwarves." Marie flinched as his hand reached down between her and Dwalin and scooped up one of the mice. Marie held her breath and waited to see what the skin changer would do next. He brought the mouse close to his face, and some sick twisted voice in Marie's mind told her that he was crushing it. "They're greedy ... blind. Blind to the lives of those they deem lesser than their own." The tension only built and Marie couldn't stand being in the middle of it.

"But orcs I hate more." Beorn growled. "What do you need?"

Marie released her pent up breath, and from the looks of it the other dwarves did as well.

"We need provisions, only enough for each one of us to carry. And safe passage to the edge of forest." Thorin told the skin changer.

"Provisions I can give." Beorn walked away from the table, still staring at the mouse cradled in his hand. "But safe passage I can not guaranty."

~*~

Beorn kept his word and allowed the dwarves to gather together enough food to sustain them and enough water canisters he could spare. But despite the protest from Thorin and the others, Beorn advised them to wait but one more day.

"The orcs are waiting still on the outskirts of the woods." Beorn had told them, "They will wait for the light to fade and for the storm to cloak them. Wait until the morn, when you have the light again."

"Wait for the light, bah." Oin grumbled as Marie passed him and his brother. They sat idling by the door with Bombur who nibble on a block of cheese, "Why there is naught but the smallest cloud in the sky."

"Must be his instincts," Marie shrugged, "He is part bear."

"He stinks of what?" The dwarf held up his broken ear trumpet towards her. It would have been
useless to repeat herself, so Marie just shook her head and carried on, her hands awkwardly resting on the pommel of her sword.

"As strange as it is, a single day's rest may do us some good." Gloin mumbled as he counted up the remaining silver pieces in his purse. Marie had just in recent weeks picked up on Gloin's meticulous nature regarding money, or what little the company had of it.

The company had finished their assigned task in preparations for the remaining journey ahead of them and were spending their time sharpening to their weapons of fixing them inside and outside the large house. Marie herself had an idea in mind and was looking for a certain blonde dwarf.

Much of the land within Beorn's walls was over grown with plant life and served as good homes for his animals. It was not as frightening as it Marie once perceived it to be thanks to the daylight and it did have a wild though be it 'homely' feel to it. Bofur had even set himself up with a piece of wood and was whittling a new flute for himself whist watching over Bifur. There were a dozen or so beehives at the far end where Beorn himself stood, chopping fresh wood. It was clear to Marie now that the skin changer was just not fond of any company outside his animals.

She looked closer and saw that he wasn't alone as she thought. Gandalf stood not far from the skin changer and was talking to him quietly, regardless if Beorn was even listening.

She found Fili sharpening his knives but a well next to a blackberry grove.

"How many of those do you have?" She asked, bending down over his shoulder.

"As many as I need." Fili held up the dwarvish dagger proudly.

"Dare I ask where you kept them?"

Fili looked up with a sly grin on his face, "That is a topic for another time." He pocketed his small whetstone and shifted to face Marie. "What can I help you with love? If you're after Kili, he's inside."

"Actually, I was hoping for a favor."

"A favor? Ask away."

Marie straightened up and looked down at her sword. "I may not be the most skilled at sword play, but I would like to know how to use one properly. Would you be able to show me?"

Fili clicked his tongue and scratched his head. "The sword is both the easiest and hardest of weapons to master, there are ..."

"I don't need much, just enough to defend myself."

"Well ... how can I say no to a face like that." Fili picked himself up and walked away, leaving behind his sword, "Come on Marie."

Marie was a little confused as she followed along. Fili made for an open area wide enough for the pair of them and found two thick sticks. "Here." He tossed Marie one.

"But shouldn't we ..."

"You honestly don't think we'd go at it with actual swords do you?"

Marie flushed with a little embarrassment and shook her head.
"Alright, now leading foot forward."

"My what?"

"Like this."

Marie mirrored Fili posture, placing her right foot forward and her left back.

"Keep you sword up."

"Right." Marie adjusted the stick in her hand. "I look silly now don't I?"

"Right now it is the one thing keeping you from getting killed."

"Point taken."

Fili chuckled and began instructing her on how to block. Marie was slow at first but soon built up a sense of rhythm. Marie knew she was by no means a fighter, nor would she ever by judging by her lesson, but she did not wish to give up so easily.

Fili was patient with her and explained things clearly to her, he was not at all like the tricky devil he was when with brother and acted like the responsible dwarf expected of him. Marie was so focused on following Fili’s instructions she was barely aware of the audience their little show had attracted, with Oin, Gloin, Bifur and Bofur slowly abandoning their separate task and conversations to watch their little burglar fumble with her stick as she attempted to strike Fili. Even Ori and Kili, who had heard the commotion from inside the house, watched on. The two youngest dwarves whispered frantically to one another while Kili’s face was alive with mischief.

"Now quicker this time." Marie caught his stick with hers and hooked it around, sending the stick out of his hand. "Impressive Marie." Fili smiled and retrieved his stick.

"I can't believe I got it that time." She puffed and lent on her's. "How do you keep up your stamina?"

"Oh you know, many ... many years of tireless practice." The dwarf looked distracted by something behind Marie

"Is something wrong?"

"Oh, no not at all love ... just try that one again."

Marie hesitated for a moment before taking up her position again, not know what was unfolding behind her.

Kili was only a few feet behind Marie, carefully creeping up on her. He mimed to Fili not to reveal his plan, even shaking his hands before him like a beggar. Fili did not spoil his fun, if only to see what Marie would do when it unfolded. The other dwarves held back their laughter at the look of utmost concentration on Kili’s face and his tongue sticking out as he inched closer.

"Alright now, remember to be aware of your surrounding Marie." Fili’s eyes bounced back between Marie and his brother, who was right on top of the hobbit. "Never let your guard down. You never know just when the enemy will ..."

"BLAGH!" Kili harshly grabbed Marie's hips and shook her.

She did not scream like the dwarves had expected, but she did turn around and struck the stick right
across Kili's stomach. He groaned and stumbled back in shock and pain.

"Oh my word, Kili!" Marie turned a shade of white as the garden erupted with laughter.

"I'm alright, 'm aril ... ugh!" Kiki clutched his stomach and fell back onto the ground, "That's quite a punch you have there."

Marie could not hold it in any longer and let out an undignified snort. "I'm .. sor ... hahahaaha! It's justHahahahayourhehe your face Kiliehehe. It's priceless!" She doubled over, unable to form complete sentences. Her body rocked with laughter until it hurt.

The dwarves froze and watched Marie. She had never laughed like that before in front of them. It wasn't a gentle lady's twitter, but it was a proper laugh, loud and infectious. He cheeks turned red and she snorted again, but this time she covered her mouth.

"Hahahaha, oh that felt good." She said once caught her breath.

"Laughing or hitting Kili?" Fili asked.

"I think both."

"Hey!" Kili cried weakly from the ground.

"Oh don't act like you didn't deserve it." Marie pointed the end of her stick into the dwarf's chest. His face fell, "So you are still mad at me?"

"A little," Marie voice was stern, but she couldn't hold the facade for long, "But it was an accident, and I think compensation has been met." She tapped his head playfully, "Just don't do it again."

There was a pause before the trio was overcome with laughter again. Kili picked himself up and had regained his chippy attitude. He joined in on Maire's lessons, Fili even call Ori over, claiming that the lad needed to learn just as much as Marie.

Marie's outburst seemed to shift to mood of all the dwarves, or so Thorin thought. He and Balin had sitting in silent contemplation when the hobbit's laughter came pouring in through the window. There was a shared moment of Nori and Dori glancing up briefly, then looking away with smiles on their faces. The only one who didn't seem happy was Dwalin, as he had been woken from his slumber.

"Blazes," He grumbled as he stood up from his bed spread, "Those rascals are at it again."

"I believe that delightful sound was Miss Marie Brother." Balin said.

Dwalin walked towards the back door and he crossed his beefy arms, "Well that's a first."

Thorin slowly joined his friend at his side in watching the events outside.

It was a warm sight to see his company at peace, even if it would not last for much longer. Bofur had finished with his flute and began to test it while Fili tried to control his students. It was amusing to see Marie and Ori trying to engage in combat only to fail as Kili kept on interrupting.

"Something's off here." Dwalin said, "The lass usually keeps to herself, not uttering so much as a peep. What changed?"

Thorin agreed that she looked much different than before, like a bird unleashed from a gilded cage and into the open air for the first time. Thorin had an inkling as to why.
'Perhaps she was lonely after all.'

His nephew picked Marie up like she was nothing and swung her around. Thorin recognized the look Kili was giving Marie and Thorin did not like it one bit.

He felt Dwalin's eyes on him. "What was that face? You look like you're going to strangle someone"

Thorin did not answer him.

"Kili put me down! I'm too old for this!" Marie shrieked but kept Kili spinning until he lost his footing and tumbled over. Despite Kili's meddling and less than graceful fall, Marie did not stop grinning.

A rumble from the south herald the oncoming storm Beorn had spoken of, but even this did not deter her. She looked genuinely happy, years had fallen from her shoulders and she seemed to glow like the sun.

'No, not glow.' Thorin corrected himself. She was sunlight.
The King’s Trust

Marie believed that no one found any real sleep that night, not with a storm bearing down on the house and the thought of encountering the orcs again. She had heard their mumbles and sounds of discomfort right into the early hours of the morning. She herself found only some hours as she drifted in and out but gave up trying after the third time she woke and passed the time by tracing a nail around her one remaining acorn button.

It felt much better to have the button out of her pocket and between her fingers, but her ring stayed in her pocket. It felt safer that way.

Once the dwarves decided they had waited long enough, they hastily collected their weapons and supplies and left the house just as the sunlight hit the rooftop. The ground was still muddy by the time the morning finally came, but with it came a clear sky as promised.

"Come along now." Gandalf appeared out of nowhere yet again with a large Clydesdale and ushered the dwarves out to the back of Beorn's land. "And take up those saddles, our host is waiting."

Marie strapped on a canteen of water and a bag holding part of their food while the dwarves collected the saddle, which looked just like a mere bundle of cloth and yarn.

Beorn was standing amongst a heard of ponies, patting the neck of the largest one softly as the dwarves and Marie approached.

"These creature no nothing of the whip or shackles," Beorn told them. "Treat them well and they will go where you need." He walked towards the west with his arms flexed at his sides. He seemed to be looking out for something. "Go now while you have the light."

The dwarves wasted no time in tacking up the ponies. They had beautiful yearling coats of black and white with long manes that were as long as they were tall. It was no wonder that the saddles and reigns were all hand made from yarn, so they would not harm such dazzling beast.

Marie approached one with caution and reached up to stroke its snout, but it backed away from her nervously.

"Oh come on now," Marie muttered and tried again. The pony’s ears folded back against its head so she stopped. "I'm not that scary."

The pony may have walked away if Thorin had not caught it. He gently muttered to the beast which calmed at his touch long enough for him to hook the harness around its head. Marie was almost envious at how confident Thorin handled himself.

"Hold him still." A pair of reigns were given to her before she could say no. She held them tightly as the dwarf king threw the blanket across the ponies back. Marie took this chance and placed her free hand on the soft felt nose. It was not like her old pony Murtle, whose coat was thick and coarse.

Maire wondered whatever became of Murtle and the other ponies, but that thought was short lived.

"Did you get enough sleep?" Thorin surprisingly asked.

"Yes I did actually thank you." Marie gave a half smile, "I think I owe that to your nephews from yesterday. They are quite a handful."

Thorin faltered in his work for a second, "Indeed." He mumbled.
"Whose are they?" Marie knew by the simple look he gave her that Thorin had no clue what she was asking about. She glanced back at the pair of brothers not far from them. "Fili and Kili. Whose are they? Your brother's?"

"No." Thorin adjusted the harness around the pony's waist. "My sister's."

"You have a sister?"
"Aye. And at a time, a brother." His words were slow with apprehension.

"What do you mean 'at a time'?" There was a look that came over Thorin, one that Marie knew all too well and she knew she had overstepped her boundaries. "I'm sorry I don't mean to pry, I only ...

She was silenced with a single look from Thorin. "You have an insatiable curiosity don't you Miss Baggins."

Marie didn't know what to say. She had a fervent hope in her heart that the dwarf king would open a little more of himself up to her, if only a little. But she may have hoped too much.

She didn't what to be shut out anymore.

But Thorin's frown dissipated and a soft chuckle escaped his lips. "I never said it was a terrible thing. Don't look so petrified."

Marie breathed a sigh of relief. "I just didn't want to cause offence."

"There is nothing to offend. Besides, you trusted me with a story, I think it is only fair that return the favour."

He was opening up to her.

"Before my grandfather attempted to reclaim Moria, Frerin and a small band of our warriors went to search for safe havens for the women and children. They were all slaughtered by Gundabad scum."

"Your brother's name was Frerin?" Marie felt bad for interrupting, but it appeared that Thorin didn't mind.

"Yes. The loss was hardest on my sister. They were closer in age therefore closer in companionship. She was never the same after that, and when she lost Vari she became so protective of the boys, to the point she was suffocating them. I guess it's because they remind her of Frerin, especially Kili."

"Was he reckless too?"
"Yes, though not as impulsive. I did my best to help Dis raise them."

"Now I see why they hold you in such high esteem. They view you as a surrogate father."

Thorin seemed to disagree with the notion and shook his head. "I am no father."

Marie looked over her shoulder. Fili had already mounted his pony while Kili was still tying supplies to his, but he looked more interested in gossiping with his brother. As he was tightening one of the straps, he glanced over and caught Marie's gaze. Her mouth quirked a little and she returned her focus to Thorin. "Regardless of what you may or may not consider yourself, you should be proud. They're both fine boys. A little out of hand at times, but still fine."
"That tongue of yours can be as honeyed as it can be bitter Miss Baggins." Thorin mounted the pony in one swift motion, "A common trait for hobbits?"

Marie shrugged and handed Thorin the reigns, "Our only weapons may be our bitter tongues, and it inflicts some more than others. The Sackville-Baggins for one."

"Who?"

"Never mind."

The pony shook its mane wildly and Marie spluttered as the hair hit her nose. Thorin smirked down at her before holding out his hand to her. Marie took it and was pulled onto the pony.

'Wait ... what?' Marie realised all too late that she was now sitting behind Thorin. 'Since when was this part of the plan?'

Some of the dwarves had to pair up on a single pony, but Marie hadn't been made aware that she was to share with Thorin of all people. She had not been thinking when he had offered his hand but in that moment it did not feel wrong to do so. It just happened, as naturally as the sun rise.

Thorin stirred the pony on to head the group. Marie made sure to lean away from him and clutched the back of the saddle as the creature rocked her side to side.

"Have you ever galloped before?" Thorin asked.

Marie eye balled the back of his head. "Do I look like I've galloped?"

"Then you might want to hold on."

"What?"

"Ride now, all of you!" Gandalf called as his horse took off to the east. Thorin dug his heels into the pony's side and it Marie almost toppled off the back. She yelped and threw her arms around Thorin's middle. She felt his chest was thrumming under her arms and was sure he was laughing at her.

'Well this is ... interesting if not awkward.'

Marie loosened her arms slightly so that was only gripping Thorin's belt her face wasn't pressed into the scabbard slung across his back.

'Might as well make do with the present course of events.'

~*~

The sun had barely passed over Midday when Mirkwood came into sight. Fortune favoured their ride as none of the orc pack had been spotted behind them or in front, but there could be no grantee just how long that would last. Marie first saw the wood when Thorin slowed the pony to a trot and turned it enough for her to peer around Thorin's shoulder. She knew with one glance there was something amiss with the forest.

"Here lies our path through Mirkwood." Gandalf said as he dismounted. He walked under a pair of
white arches that had begun to fade and age, but not from time. They looked like one of the entrances at Rivendell, only ... for lake of a better word, wilder.

Gandalf looked back over at the company, but Marie could see his gaze staring beyond them, back at the path they had just taken. "Set the ponies loose. Let them return to their master."

The dwarves did as they were bid, but Marie remained seated as Thorin slid off in front of her.

She was starting to agree with Thorin's original apprehension about the forest. Beorn was right, there was a darkness in the trees, twisting them from root to branch in unsightly shapes. Leaves of sickly hues grew on blackened branches that fought for dominance over one another.

"This place feels ... sick. Like a disease is choking it from within." Marie's fingers curl around rope holding the water canteen over her shoulder. "Is there no other way round?"

Gandalf shook his head, "Not if we go two hundred miles north, or twice that distance south."

Marie chewed on the inside of her lip as the wizard walked further into the forest with caution.

'We should go ... south.'

Her hand slid down to rest on her hip. She was overcome by an urge to touch the ring again.

"I don't think Gandalf would want me sending you back with the ponies."

Marie gasped and her hand jerked away from her leg. "Alright, alright just ... give me a minute."

She told a waiting Thorin.

She hated dismounting.

This was the one thing she could not grasp when it came to horseback, being only three feet it was a long way down for her. She swung a leg over and gripped the saddle tightly, looking down at her fall. She readied for her clumsily decent but was stop by Thorin. He wordlessly placed his hands around her waist and picked her right up off the saddle. He was not rough with her, more careful than anything. Marie's hands came forward and grasped the fur of his coat as he lowered her to the ground. There was something comforting about the weight of his hands on her hips, the warmth of them sleeping through her clothes.

She mumbled her thanks as she let him go.

"I have something to ask of you." Thorin muttered.

Marie blinked in surprise but listened on.

"Before I do, can I trust you?"

"What? Thorin I thought ..."

"Can I trust you?" He asked earnestly.

"You can trust me." Marie said each word slowly to make her point, even if it made her sound silly. "I hope you would after all this time."

Thorin's eyes danced about for any onlookers, but the pony hid the pair of them well enough. He pulled something out from his coat, but it did not take long for Marie to realise what it was. It was the iron key and the map Gandalf had given him in her dinning room, the legacy his father had left him. "We can not risk these falling into unsavoury hands. You at least may escape should that..."
come to pass." He took hold of Marie's hand placed the map and key into her palm. She looked down at his large hands folded around her's. "Keep them safe." His hands gave one firm squeeze then slipped from her touch, yet her hands still felt heavy.

He was trusting her with the two most important things he possessed, her of all people. An emotion started to swell in her chest, but Marie could put her finger on just what it was. Pride? Fear? Happiness?

"Thorin, I ..." But when she looked up he was already walking away from her with their pony.

'Why must he always do that?' Marie slid the folded map and the key into her pocket with a sigh and watched passively as Thorin handed the pony to Nori who loosened the saddle slightly before letting it join its brethren in returning home.
"Not my horse I need it!" Gandalf came rushing out of the forest, startling the company.

Marie was confused. Why would he need his horse? Unless he planned to ... 

"You're not leaving us ... are you?" She asked. Gandalf gave a hasty nod and an apologetic glance to her as he passed her, "I would not do this unless I had to. I'll be waiting for you at the over look, on the slopes of Erebor. Keep the map and key safe. Do not enter that mountain without me." He directed his warning at Thorin, but the dwarf king gave very little to acknowledge it. This did not sit well with Maire. Every time Gandalf left them, trouble found them again and again in even fouler forms.

"This is not the Greenwood of Old, the very air of the forest is heavy with illusion. It will seek to enter your mind and lead you astray."

The way the wizard spoke, Marie thought he was implying that the forest was a living creature. Gandalf mounted his horse and stirred it around. "You must stay on the path, do not leave for if you do you'll never find it again."

The sunlight faded as the black horse and his grey rider made their way towards the north and Marie felt the pelting of rain on her head. They had lost the light.

'Bad things are going to happen. I just know it.' Marie followed on as the dwarves entered the forest with Gandalf's warning ringing in her ears.

"Stay on the path."
'Stay on the path, stay on the path, stay on ... the path ...'

The poorly kept path they had been walking on lead them around and around, like a snake coiling in the long grass, but it wasn't bringing them closer to their goal. Every once and a while one of the dwarves found a pale flat tile of the Elven Road, but dirty covered them up so well it could have been a common stone leading them astray. This proved to be true, for the 'path' lead to a ravine filled with roots.

They had gotten themselves lost.

The dwarves had disbanded and tried to retrace their steps, but found no sign of the path. Their despair resonated like bells as they looked, and looked ... and looked.

"I don't remember this place. None of it's familiar."

"What hour is it?"

"We don't even know what day it is."

"Is there no end!"

Marie felt her mind slipping as she tried to recall the last time that they had stopped to rest. They must have at some point, the food bag she had been carrying felt lighter. Maybe she had dropped them.

'Stay on the path, stay on ... the path ... what path?'

Marie chanted this phrase over and over while she trudged along behind Bofur, who in turn was blindly following Nori who followed Dwalin. No one was truly leading them at this point, not even Thorin. It was so very hard to tell what time of day it was, for no light could pierce through the canopy.

The forest seemed stuck, like in the Goblin Tunnels. That strange world where life and death were tangled, like webs.

Marie felt dizzy. 'Ring around a rosy, a pocket full of posies.' Had she been playing those silly games again? She must have been dizzy, for she was hearing Radagast's voice in her head.

'Nothing grows anymore, at least nothing good. The air is fouled decay, but worst are the webs.'

Marie's head was splitting open. She could hear everything, from the crunching of leaves she stepped on to the groaning of the trees, if trees could groan.

'Webs ... webs everywhere.'

Even the webs were whispering to her.

She ducked her head as she wiped her brow, and saw her feet going backwards.

She blinked and she was standing still. Hadn't she been walking just a minute ago? No, and five of the dwarves had been waddling aimlessly around one tree. She was just standing there watching them.
'Ring around and around, round and round in a circle ... oh blast it! We're going in circles.'

"Look." Ori stopped the circle and picked something up off the forest floor. Dori took it from him, "A tobacco pouch. There's dwarves in this woods."

"Dwarves from the Blue Mountains no less. This is exactly the same as mine."

"It is yours Bofur." Marie brought her hands to her face and rubbed her eyes until she saw spots. She had to think, but thinking was so hard to do. She rubbed harder to drive out the illusions. "We are lost."

"We're not lost." Thorin growled as he paced back and forth, like an animal trapped in a cage. To Marie he certainly looked the part. "We keep heading east."

"Which way is east? We've lost the sun." Oin said.

The company's angry grumbles grew louder, and they began to shove and pull at each other. The mounting tension had reached its breaking point.

Marie backed away from the brawl, but she did not see the root protruding out from the ground. Her heel caught on it and she went backwards.

It took an eternity for her to fall. Her arms flailed uselessly before her like the arms of a doll and her vision became clouded with yellow and red. It was like she was falling through water of the Brandywine River as a child, sinking lower and lower into the black and leaving the glistening sunlight above.

Her delusions were literally knocked out of her when her head finally collided with the ground. The world went silent and all Marie could do was look up at the canopy in a moment of well needed clarity.

'"That's it. The sun, we need to find the sun.'"

Beyond the dark canopy above them, there was the sun. All Maire needed to do was get past it.

A shadow loomed before her face and Marie weakly lifted her hand to brush it away, but she was surprised when another hand took it and pulled her up. It didn't take long for her recognize the familiar grip, and the tickling of fur against her nose when she collided with the hand's owner.

Twice Thorin had offered his hand and twice Marie had taken it without a second thought.

She gave a little shake of her head and her hearing returned, only the sound of angry jabs and dwarvish insults from the others were muffled.

Her head was throbbing from the pain and she unwittingly resting her forehead against Thorin's chest. This must have surprised him and Marie could feel his hand hover at the back of her head.

Thorin said something, but Marie couldn't make it out what over another noise. Not from the dwarves, but the whispers again.

"Do you hear that?" She muttered.

Thorin shifted his body away from her causing Marie to wobble on her feet.

'"Wait, do go ... what?' Marie was surprised at herself and began tapping the side of her temple to knock out the thought.
"Quiet!" Thorin's voice broke through the muffled wall in Marie's ears with a sharp pop. "We're being watched."

The dwarves went deadly quiet.

Marie too this opportunity to take some action and quickly selected a tree. With great haste she began to climb.

"Miss Marie what are you doing there?" Balin asked with a quizzical look. Marie paused and looked back down at him. The forest didn't appear to have affected him as strongly as the others and her had his wits about him, Marie hoped he did. The others still seemed lost as they blankly stared up at her, except Thorin who looked more frustrated.

"We need to know where we are. If we don't, we are going to end up killing one another before too long."

"Well yes but ..."

"I'm faster. I'll be back in a moment."

"But Miss Mar ..."

"Don't move from here or you'll get even more lost."

Marie resumed her ascent and hurried up the trunk, leaving a very confused bunch of dwarves behind.

"Miss Marie! Be careful!"

The hobbit did not take her time climbing like she used to, she did so with as much speed as she could muster. She could already feel her mind succumbing to the forest's poisonous air once again. She dug her fingers into the tree and pulled herself up and up, regardless if she could feel some unspecified liquid that oozed out when she pulled away the black bark. She was running out of time, the wooziness was taking hold of her, making her eyelids droop.

She reached the top and pushed frantically through the leaves. The light hit her face and drew from her all the poison. Her fatigue faded as she breathed in the fresh air greedily and looked around. The whole canopy was a great field of red, topped with the golden sky of the sunset and thousands of dark blue butterflies dancing across the canopy.

For the first time since entering Mirkwood, Marie finally saw something beautiful.

"I ... see a lake!" She called out, hoping the dwarves could hear her. "And a river ... just ahead of us!" That was not all she could see. "There's the Lonely Mountain! We're almost there!"

There was no response from below.

"Hello?! I know which way to go!"

Still nothing.

'Don't tell me they wandered off?'

She finally heard something. A branch snapping somewhere below. Marie moved the leaves about to see what had made that noise but was distracted by one of the trees in the distance, swaying
violently.

"That's odd." Marie squinted to see better in the glare of the sunset. Whatever it was, it was coming right at her very quickly. Marie panicked a little and ducked back up the canopy but lost her footing. She had stepped on something slippery which propelled her forward and right back down into the forest. She plummeted down into what she thought to be her death, but she landed not on the ground but in a web.

It was spread across two trees like a net, sticking to her legs and arms and hair as she struggled to sit up. How had she missed all the webs on her way up?

The sound of another branch snapping made her stop wriggling and look up. Out of the masses of white webs that were strung through the trees, a giant spider with an inky black hide crawled out and came down towards Maire. Unlike any spider she had ever seen, it hiss and screeched as it came closer and closer with large sharp pincers bared at her

The spider landed right above her, trapping her between eight long legs and six pairs of beady eyes bearing down on her.

In the present circumstances it would perfectly normal for anyone with an innate fear of spider to cry. Marie did and she felt she was acting out a childhood nightmare, only this was real.

She would have been screaming bloody murder but she was hyperventilating terribly. All that came out were wheezes and half baked sobs as she tried even more earnestly to free herself. She managed to free one arm and her small sword from the sheath but her body pulsed with so much fear and adrenaline that all she could do was shake. She was suffocating on her screams, her heart was racing.

As the spider tossed and turned her, wrapping her up into a cocoon with its limbs, Marie was trapped in the midst of a panic attack.

Her eyes rolled back in her skull and she was falling again, sinking back in the dark abyss.

~*~

Marie couldn't remember exactly when her fear of spiders started.

Perhaps it was that time when climbing the Party Tree when she was ten, and she had stumbled across a nest. Or when she had been gardening with her father and was bitten on her fourteenth birthday. Or it was that one nightmare as a little girl that did it. Whatever the incident that triggered her fear, it didn't matter. She was dead anyway.

Was she dead? She was still thinking, and breathing too.

She sent a thought to her big toe, which twitch in response.

As she came further out of her state of shock, she heard a clicking noise and felt her back scrapping along something. Her heart rate started picking up again, but she quickly stopped it getting any faster with some calm breaths and opened her eyes.

She tried to assess what had happened after she fainted and where she was now, which proved
difficult to do as she was covered her to toe in a web cocoon. She could vaguely make out the branches above her head but clearly saw the giant spider that had caught her press its pincers right into her face.

Marie panicked again and bit her tongue to shut out the fear, letting the foul insect walk over her. Her fingers tightened around the hilt of her sword that lay against her thigh, and when she could take it anymore her arm shot up. The spider shrieked as the blade cut through its middle, its legs twitched and curled in pain. Marie used the sword to push the eight legged creature off her and over the edge of the tree branch she had been dragged across.

With the deed done, Marie sat up and quickly peeled slippery cocoon off her, shivering in disgust.

"Now ... where am I?"

The hobbit glanced up and saw that the branches she had been looking at housed more than just more webs and dead leaves. Marie clasped a hand over her mouth to stop any noises from coming out. It was an enormous nests teaming with many, larger spiders hauling in other cocoons. To Marie's horror, they were the unconscious forms of the dwarves.

The grip on her mouth tightened as she crawled awkwardly along the brand to hide behind the trunk, and not a moment too soon as one of the spiders crawled up the tree behind her. Marie tasted blood on her tongue as her teeth bit into her palm. Its legs came within inches of her shoulders.

"It's okay Marie, it's okay, just don't scream. They can't see you.""Kill them, kill them now."

Marie's eyes shot open. Had she heard correctly?

"Eat them. Eat them now."

She stood a crept closer to the nest as the last of the dwarves had been strung up. It couldn't have been the spiders. Spiders don't talk.

"Eat them now while the blood is running."

"Their hide is tough but there's good juice inside"

Marie stood corrected. The spiders were indeed talking.

"Stick it again. Stick it again,"

"Yes, again, Again. Stick it again."

One of the cocoons shook and a large foot kicked one of the spiders. If Maire had to take a guess, she would say that Bombur.

"The meats alive and kicking."

"Stick it again."

"Come. Let us feast."

"Feast! Feast!"

"FEAST!"

The spiders swarmed from every corner and every shadow, causing Marie's fight or flight instincts
to kick in, but fear for her companions outweighed her anxiety issues and she felt driven to act. She looked around at her feet and found only bones. She grabbed one and tossed it into the forest, where it crashed and fell to the earth. The noise caught the spiders' attention.

"What is it?"

"What is it?"

"Feast?"

"What is it?"

They crawled out of the nest and hurried to find the bone. Marie ducked down to avoid a collision with one that climbed the branch above her head. They were gone.

All but one.

Bombur was trying to get loose from his sticky trap when the spider slunk down from above, all six of its eyes full of greed for the plump dwarf. The spider had its back to the hobbit as it turned him with its two front legs.

"Fat and juicy. Just a little taste."

The adrenaline coursing through Marie forced her hand before she knew what to do. She hacked at the spider's thorax and cut off a large chunk of it. The spider gave a blood curdling cry and turned, screaming right into Marie's face. Her sword bounced off its pincers as she tried it cut it again, but her second attempt was more successful with the removal of the end on its legs. The spider tried to fight back, but it wasn't easy to hit something you can't see.

"Curses! Where is it?! Where is it?!"

Marie gripped the pommel with both hands good and tight as she remembered a striking method Fili had shown her. She raised the sword to eye level with the point direct at the spider, and in that moment she viewed the spider as the embodiment of her fear and drove the blade into its head.

"AAHHGGG! IT STINGS! SSSTTTINGSS!"

Marie yanked the sword out as the spider fell from the nest. Its carcass made a loud thud once it finally reached the ground. Marie removed the ring and the world went back to normal. She felt strangely giddy. She had stared her fear right in the eye, all six of them, and came out triumphant.

"Sting huh? Not bad." She held up her sword, the blade was soaked with thick tawny coloured blood. "Very well then, Sting you shall evermore be."

She used the newly dubbed String to cut down the dwarves down from the nest, whilst keeping an ear and eye out for the spiders lest they came back. As the last of the cocoons fell, Marie peered over the nest's edge to observe. The webs allowed for a safe, slow decent to the ground where the company groaned on impacted and wriggled around like white caterpillars. Only instead of butterflies, thirteen disorientated dwarves emerging from the cocoons.

"What happened? Disgusting what is this?"

"How did I end up upside down?"
"Where's Marie?"

The hobbit in question opened her mouth to call down to the dwarves, but yelped as another spider suddenly appeared. It lunged, forcing Marie backwards to evade the pincers. She stabbed the spider's belly, but as it fell its legs trapped Mare in its embraces to take her with it.

It branch the spider hit jolted the poor hobbit's small body violently and knocked the air out of her. With a final crunch the spider landed and Marie climbed out of its legs. She groaned and rubbed her tail bone.

'Falling? Why must it always be falling?'

It dawned on Marie that she was rubbing her behind with the hand she had been holding her ring with, but she didn't have it in her hand now.

She padded herself down nervously.

"Where is it?" She couldn't have lost it. Not now.

'No no no no no NO! My ring! Where is it?' She dropped to her knees and searched the forest floor for it, dread gnawing at her mind. She had to have her ring back.

Nothing else mattered anymore, not until she found the ring.

Her head snapped up, like her name had been called, and she saw a glint of gold just a few feet away. Marie smiled, but that smile did not last. The earth under one of the tree shifted and a grotesque beast with a body like a centipede crawled out. It whole back was covered in a white shell, all the way over its head and down its spear like legs. As it came in full view of the forest's dull light, its legs tapped at the gold ring with dumb innocence.

"Stop touching it." Marie seethed, but the creature did not head her. This riled within Maire anger like no other. A powerful biting sensation, possessive and wild that only grew with the creature's ignorant prodding at the ring.

She raised her sword and with it charged at the strange beast with brutal force, slamming the elvish steel on the hard shell. Guttural noises passed through her gritted teeth as she hacked aimlessly, praying that she would break through the tough hide and kill the creature before it took her ring.

Maire slipped Sting under its neck and slid it under the shell. With that she plunged the sword into the soft flesh of the neck. The creature shrieked pathetically as it bled out quickly, but Marie didn't care. All she saw was the ring. She plucked it up from under the creature greedily and whispered to it, "Mine."

Marie blinked in surprise. Her voice did not sound like her own.

“Wait ... what was I ...?”
When she could pull her gaze from the band of gold, she observed just what she had done.

The shattered shell, the dismembered limbs all over the ground, blood on her hands. She did all this?

'What have I done?'

She wanted to blame the ring, desperately, but she couldn't bring herself to and she didn't know
why. What came over her? Maddness?

She had been so driven by her rage she had failed to hear the sounds of battle and the cries of dwarven commands coming from just beyond the thicket. One voice, in all its gruff distress, stood out the most to her and made her stomach churn.

"Thorin."
'Oh this is not good. Not good at all.'

Just like Marie had predicted before stepping foot into Mirkwood, the company's luck continued to run as thin as a butterfly's wing.

By the time she had found the dwarves they were surrounded. Not by the spiders, but by elves. Tall, lethal looking figures clad in dark armour, and every one of them had an arrow cocked and ready to fire at the dwarves. They stripped them of their weapons and remaining provisions and forced them to walk deeper into the forest, without so much as an explanation from the dwarves. All Marie could do was to remain unseen and wait for the right opportunity ... whatever that may be.

Marie managed to follow behind the procession of elves, thanks to the ring, but that didn't mean that she could do so easily. One of the elves, a tall fair haired male who had taken Thorin's sword, kept stepping out of formation and looking back. A number of times he stared unknowingly at Marie and she had to completely freeze where she stood, lest her hobbit feet snap the tiniest twig. This elf stood out from his brethren. Marie could see even through the magic cloaking her the bright hue of his eyes, blue like sapphires and holding an air of command and grace that the other elves did not have.

'He must be someone of importance.' Marie mused, her leg was growing tired from balancing on it as she waited for him to look away and rejoin the elves.

Wherever the elves were taking the company, it was somewhere away from the poisoned trees of the forest, where the sunlight shone upon the path and the roar of a raging river could be heard. They came before a bridge that passed over the river and brought them to a great wall of white stone built into the side of what Marie assumed to be a small mountain made entirely of trees. The wall had five gates but only one that was opened by two guards when the fair haired elf called for them to do so. Marie hid behind a tree as the dwarves were forced into the strange tree mountain. The fair haired elf waited until the last of the elves to pass before giving another order to the guards. Marie crept as fast as she could to make it before the gates closed, but as she got closer, her foot brushed against a few fallen leaves.

The elf turned once more but this time Marie did not freeze, but carried on in the hopes of getting in front of him and inside the mountain. It was a risk, considering how keen the elf race was but Marie took it. She passed by the elf as he continued to spy out into the forest.

Once safely inside Marie slowly let out the breath she had been holding, but took another sharp one when she took in her surroundings. The Great Woodland Realm.

Great trees reached up into the roof where no leaves grew, some of them straight and alone, some twisting together to become one. Their trunks dotted with small globes of light filled the cavern, creating soft tones in every corner. Everything looked carved or made around the trees in a manner so perfect it was hard to believe it to be real. Marie pinched herself to make sure she was seeing right, wary that the ring's magic may have altered what she saw.

The elves took the dwarves up a steep path that rose high above the ground. Marie glanced over the
side and saw channels of flowing water running below and the slight movement of elves passing under. It was a long way down.

'Wouldn't want to lose your footing that's for sure.'

The procession came to a halt before a throne seated high in the very heart of the great elvish hall. The throne rose up from the pavilion like a gnarly root before taking on a much grander form of a throne topped with what resembled the antlers of elks and deer. At Marie's present position behind the dwarves and their capture she could not see to whom the throne belong to. The crowd of dwarves and elves filled the space of the pavilion, leaving Marie stranded at the bottom of the last flight of steps with two guards in gold plated armour who stood a still as stone. The hobbit dared not to come any closer.

"Aaya Thranduil. Sin naugrim anes elea ed' i hyarmenya málos."

An elf, female from what Marie could tell, spoke over the disgruntled snarls of the dwarves.

"It has been a long time since Thorin Oakenshield ventured east." A voice rich with power silenced even Bofur's incoherent babbling. "For what purpose would he dare cross out boarders? To seek refuge? To plunger my lands? To beg? Sut aica ten'ile"
Marie wished she could see what was happening.

"Great King of the Woodland Realm, it was never our intention to invade your territory." She heard Balin say to the unknown king, "We ... were ambushed and brought further north than we had hoped."

"That still does not answer as to why you have come east." The voice demanded, but Maire did not hear anyone give an answer. "It is curious as to why the Heir of Durin would return after so many years in exile, and with such menial a company he would bring with him."

"What did you say you Rukhsul menu?!" Dwalin shouted. A gentle chuckle was the response the warrior received.

"It would appear that you kinsman are as unruly as to be expected. Legolas!"

"Ada."

"See to it that these dwarves are taken to the dungeons."

The elves took hold of the dwarves and turned them around to match them to the dungeons. "Not Oakenshield." The voice told the guards, "I believe the King Under the Mountain and I have much to talk about."

Marie scooted to the side as they came back down the steps. The dwarves grumbled to each other in their language. She was torn between following the rest of the dwarves to the dungeons and waiting behind with Thorin. She crippled under her on curiosity to see this 'Thranduil' and stayed put.

"I won't forget this. I promise you elves this insult will not go unchecked." Dwalin continued to threaten the elves all the way down the path until they were out of sight.

Marie tiptoed to the stairs to climb them, but when she look up she saw the way blocked, by a man of alarming beauty. Pale and perfect were the features that elves were blessed with, and this man had been blessed twice over. He stood tall, and from where Marie stood he appeared even more so,
and was cloaked in a robe of dark silver which clashed with the white blonde locks of hair that draped over his shoulders. When Maire saw the crown of red berries and thorns adorned upon his head, she knew that this was Thranduil.

"You needn't fear for your companions, they will be treated well, so long as they cause no trouble. Now, do you feel more inclined to talk?"

Still Thorin gave him only silence.

"No matter. Even if you did confide your intentions, I know to what ends they lead to. Some may even imagine that a noble quest is at hand." Thranduil said as he looked out over the Woodland Realm. "A quest to reclaim a homeland and slay a dragon."

There was something in the way he spoke that bothered Marie. For all the beauty she saw, and she admitted was briefly smitten by, she could not help by sense a much darker truth behind the elf’s fair visage. Like Black Bryony berries, beneath even the ripest of their scarlet skin was the deadliest poison.

"I myself suspect a more prosaic motive. Attempted burglary, or something of that ilk."

The corners of Marie's mouth pulled back in an unflattering manner. 'Right on the mark there.'

Thranduil slowly turned and walked towards his throne. Marie climbed the stairs and watched the scene unfold before her. The Elven King looked down at Thorin with a taunting quirk on his lips, like a hunter toying with his cornered prey knowing it could not escape.

"You have found away in."

Thorin acted undeterred, even with the Elven King bearing down on him.

"You seek that which would bestow upon you the right to rule. The Arkenstone."

At last Thorin gave some reaction to his words. His head dropped ever so slightly. Thranduil smiled. "It is precious to you beyond measure. I understand that." It was not in the smile that Maire saw the cruelty, it was in his eyes that widened slowly as he spoke. "There are gems in the mountain that I too desire. White gems of pure starlight." Thranduil bowed his head. "I offer you my help."

Marie took a small step towards the dwarf to hear what he would say. "I am listening."

"I will let you go if you but return what is mine."

'Well that seems ... reasonable, what he says is true.' Marie thought.

Thorin turned away from the Elven King. "A favour for a favour?"

Marie glanced from side to side as Thorin walked towards her, looking for her escape, but the closer he came the heavier her own feet felt. Marie clenched her hands and stood absolutely still as Thorin stopped just a hairbreadth from her, his eyes locked with hers.

Somewhere beyond Thorin's imposing form, Marie heard Thranduil's voice offering another promise. "You have my word, one King to another."

The muscles in Thorin's jaw constricted. The kindling of a long held grudge began to burn within
his eyes and Marie alone saw the pain that fanned the flames.

"I would not trust Thranduil, the great King, to honor his word should the end of all days be upon us!" Thorin shouted for all the Woodland Realm to hear, and unfortunately Marie caught the brunt of his fury. The power of his voice forced her backwards until she tittered on the top step. This proved to be useful as Thorin swung round to jab a fist at the Elven King.

"You lack all honor! I have seen how you treat your friends. We came to you once, starving, homeless, seeking your help, but you turned your back. You turned away from the suffering of my people in the inferno that destroyed us! **Imrid amrad ursu!**"

Thranduil moved quicker than the eye could fathom, "Do not talk to me of Dragon Fire." He was bent low so that his face was only inches from Thorin's, his voice no louder than a hiss. "I know its rathe and ruin." Marie peered around Thorin's shoulder to see what the angered elf would do next.

His face twitched and he looked to be overcome by pain, then Marie saw the skin on his left cheek dissolve, revealing burnt muscles and cheekbone, even his left eye turned milky white like a blind man's.

"I have ... faced ... the Great Serpents of the north." Thranduil crocked out before pulling away, his face becoming whole once again.

Was that a scar long since healed? Or a constant remind hidden by magic?

"I warned your grandfather of what his greed would summon, but he would not listen." Thranduil said walking up the steps to his throne, "You are just like him." He waved his hand. Two of the guards came forward and took hold of Thorin. Marie scuttled back down the steps as the elves forced him around and dragged him away from the throne.

"Stay here if you will and rot. A hundred years is a mere blink in the life of an elf." Thranduil said, throwing himself back into his throne, "I'm patient. I can wait."

Marie had no choice but to keep running ahead of the elves as they took Thorin, presumably to join the other dwarves in the dungeons. The problem was that they were moving quite fast despite Throin's resistance and Marie knew she would trip over herself eventually. But before that happened the elves dragged Thorin down a steep slope and Marie had to run back to catch them. Ahead of them she recognized three of the elves that had captured the dwarves just standing by a crossroads muttering to each other.

The guards shouted something along the lines of **"Elros, palu in fer!"** and one of the elves stepped forward, a set of keys jangling in his grasp. He joined the guards and led them into the dungeons. The dungeons were carved into the stone walls that supported the upper levels of the halls. All the cells that she passed were empty, which worried Marie.

'**Where are the others?**'

The elf with the keys opened one of the doors and grabbed Thorin by the scruff of his neck. The last Marie saw of him was the elf tossing him into the cell and locking it.

The armoured guards turned as one and marched back up the stairs, thankfully in a single file so that Marie could squeeze herself into the wall. It hurt but she was still undiscovered. With the elves finally gone she got a proper look around.

'**Alright. Plan to escape, plan to escape. Just how can we escape?**'
"Thorin?!" Marie was startled. That was Balin's voice, but where was it coming from? She looked over and saw more cells lining the walls, reminding Marie of honeycombs. "Did the king offer you a deal?!"

"He did. I told him he could do Ish Kakhfe Ai'd Du Rugnu! Him and all his kin!" He finished. Marie cringed Marie didn't understand exactly what he had said, but she knew none of it to be good.

She chanced one last look for any elves before removing the ring. She shivered as the veil of magic disappeared, leaving a subtle need for it niggling the back of her mind. Now she was exposed completely.

'Quiet as a mouse Marie, remember.'

She tip toed down to the Thorin's cell and looked in to see the damage. Thorin was just standing in the middle of the cell, his fist balled up at his sides as his whole body shook. His anger had yet to cool off.

Marie double guessed her decided to try and talk to him. 'Mmmmmaybe I should wait. No. No time.'

She must have made a sound for Thorin's head snapped up. He looked the most surprised she had ever seen him and perhaps even a little bit relieved. But she may have been seeing what she wanted to see.

Thorin's mouth opened but before any sound came out Marie pressed a finger to her lips to silence him, her other hand nervously waving about. Thorin understood and drew closer to the bars.

"How in Durin's name did you make it down here?" He asked in disbelief.

"I have my ways. Most of it revolving around luck." Marie's hand tightened around the ring as she whispered back.

"The map and key?"
"Safe." But Marie still pressed a hand against her pocket, just in case.

"Thank Mahal."

"You know your negotiation skills are quite tactless." Marie let slip. Thorin looked at her baffled.

"How did you ...?"

"Like I said. I have ways." She quickly responded. "I don't pretend to understand your animosity for the Elven King, but for the sake of your men ..."

"There is more to it Marie. Thanduil would have double crossed us without any hesitation." Thorin growled. "He cares only for himself."

"Well, now comes the tricky part." Marie glanced about the cell door. She gripped the iron door and gave it a slight shake. "There is no way we can break the door in." She mused out loud.

"Are you already formulating a plan?"

"Actually I am."

Thorin's dark brows creased together. "Should they find you you'll be thrown in one of these cells
and the quest will truly be lost."

"They will not find me, I promise." A noise from above spooked her and she looked back over her shoulder.

She did not see any elves but she did feel a large hand settle over her's, still locked around the bar. She looked back at the dwarf. "Marie these are no trolls that can be swayed with wit. Even for all your skills with words and your nimble feet, it will not be easy." He spoke not with the rough chastising tone she had grown accustomed to. He sounded concerned.

"You said you trusted me. So trust me."

Thorin sighed. "It would appear that you are our only hope now."

Marie felt something go thump in her chest. "I promise I'll find a way to get you out."

"Just ... be careful Marie."

She nodded and pulled away from the bars and away from him. She hurried back up the steps and slipped the ring back on. Now something else lingered in her mind, like she had forgotten to say something to Thorin.

'Enough Marie. Focus. Now ... where to begin?'

Chapter End Notes

Just some rough translations.

Elvish: Aaya Thranduil. Sin naugrim anes elea ed' i hyarmenya málos: Hail Thranduil. These dwarves were found on in the southern forest. (roughly)
Sut aica ten'ile: How Pitiful.
Elros, palu in fer: Elros, Open the door.
Khazdul : Rukhsul menu Offspring of an Orc
Now Marie never let herself curse, save the odd slip of the tongue here and there of less colorful words. But the only allowance she gave herself was when she was beyond the point of frustration and the only reason she wasn't screaming bloody murder at the top of her lungs was the knowledge that if she did she would have the whole of the Woodland Realm on her in seconds.

She had been sneaking around the halls for what felt like an eternity, and all she had found were only two other ways out, both guarded and too far from the dungeons for the dwarves to make it to without being seen.

The paths ran like the vines of a bush, tangled, unpredictable and seemed to go on and on with no end.

She had already gotten lost twice and had wasted precious time trying to retrace her steps.

'Ooh sod it.' Marie had to stop, so she did. Tucking herself between a perfectly carved archway and a tall glass vase filled with pink and lilac flowers she let out a nice long sigh. Luckily, there was no one in sight, though she could hear music coming from above.

As she took a moment to compose herself, she let her mind correlate its many thoughts without the pent up frustration. During her how many minutes or hours spent going around in circles she had made an interesting observation about the Wood Elves. Unlike the elves she had meet in Rivendell, who held themselves calmly and graceful when they spoke and moved regardless to their station, there was a startling contrast within the Woodland Realm.

On one hand there were the common residents of the halls (if elves could be common). They, in their silks of greens and burnt iron and autumn colored hair braided back, graced on by peacefully as they practically sang to each other in their mysterious language. Marie wondered if they even knew of the terror that lurked in their beloved forest, but a daunting voice in her head told her that they simply chose not to acknowledge it. Yes that was it. They stayed within their golden halls and let the darkness linger elsewhere, and left the guards to man the gates.

Ah yes, on the other hand there were the guards, grim faced and with a weapon in hand constantly. They moved, or in some cases stood guard with purpose and a deadly precision, as if an enemy may strike from anywhere at any time. They were the ones Marie had to extra careful with, for they reacted to the slightest sound. Even at the distance she maintained from them she could spot the nicks in their armor, evidence of all the encounters with those giant spiders and other unsavory things. The grim on their fair faces was justified in Marie's books, for she had seen what they fight off, but fate only knows how many times they had faced it.

Speaking of which, one of the very same guards that had captured Marie's companions came swiftly around a corner and passed the invisible hobbit, but suddenly stopped as she reached the archway. Her long copper curls swayed across her back as she stood there, still as stone. Marie craned her head around to see her properly. The female elf looked ... troubled. Marie knew a troubled woman's face when she saw one, and the elf was trying ever so hard to hide it.

For one so fair, there was defiantly a strain pulling at her cheeks.
Her downcast head slowly rose up and her shoulders pulled back, composer restored and she walked on through the archway. Marie decided it would be best to follow her. She seemed to be of high ranking among the guards, perhaps a way out could through her. Marie hurried on after the elf.

The hall grew dark as they moved along, but the elf moved on through regardless. They climbed yet another set of stairs, much to Marie's chagrin. And they were a very long set of stairs, and Marie was just about running to keep up.

'Just how many stairs can there be? No wonder they're so ... so ...'

Marie felt her thought dissolve as she entered into the light once more. The female elf had led her into what must have been the canopy of the realm, for there was no ceiling but a great opening in the trees that revealed the night sky. It took Marie's breath away to see just how bright the stars were this side of the world. Once she had taken in the sight above she was brought back down by the sweet smell of honey and apples. She had stumbled on what look like a revel. Tiny lights that resembled the stars hung the trees above, connected by dozens of colored ribbons. Flowers decorated the tops of tables and the heads of the partying elves and Marie had to dodge the tipsy ones.

Drunk elves? Now Marie had just about seen it all.

'Wait, where did she go?' She had lost sight of her elf amongst the revelers.

This was going to be interesting. She slipped though the warm bodies and kept an eye out for the elf, the needle in a very lively haystack. It did not help that the smell of food made her stomach ache painfully for what of food and the music made her body tingle and giddy, not to mention the strong odour of wine drifting off the tall fair beings. Their long robes fluttered about them as they danced and the fabric kept hitting Marie.

She finally found her elf, standing before a podium with her hands crossed tightly in front of her. Her head was lowered but her eyes darted about as she watched the festive elves with a blank expression. At the top of the podium was the Elven King, unsurprisingly.

He sat upon another throne, not as elaborate as his official one but still quite imposing, and was engaged in a conversation with two other elves, both with fair blonde hair though not as striking at Thranduil's. But he seemed more interested in the goblet he held gingerly in his hand than what the elf lords had to say. The king's crown was absent, but he kept his head high and held just as much power without it. He was dressed in darker robes than before and had a long cloak the shade of autumn leaves draped over his arms. To the king's right stood the bright eyed archer from the forest, with Orcrist slung against his hip.

'Thorin is not going to be happy about that.'

Another observation Marie suddenly made was just how remarkable similar the archer and the king looked like, but a passing elf maid's long sleeve knocked her off balance and she tumbled to the floor. She heard her hands scuff along the surface. Fortunately the elves were either too drunk or occupied with other matters to notice.

All but one.

When Marie looked up, she saw the Elven King's cold eyes staring in her direction.

Had he heard her all the way from up there? Impossible. They music, all the laughing, how ...?
Thranduil gave the tiniest cock of his head ... then closed his eyes and turned his head the other way.

"Captain Tauriel." Marie heard the loud jangling of keys and someone rushing by her, just missing her feet. The bright eyed elf turned his head sharply and her stared down at the female captain and the newcomer. Marie followed his example and turned around. The two elves spoke in rushed tones until it looked like the female gave him an order, but Marie couldn't be sure what had been said. What she could be sure of was that the new elf with dark brass hair had in his possession the keys to the dungeons.

Marie picked herself up and edged herself in behind the elf, 'Alright then, new plan.'

The elf took off through the crowd with Marie tailing him closely. It would seem it was time to test her skills on perhaps the most lethal of the races of Middle Earth.

~*~

Of all the places to end up the hobbit expected to end up, the cellars were not one of them. The brass haired elf had taken her back down through the dungeons on what one might assume to be a routine inspection of the prisoners (all of whom were asleep by now) then headed for an offshoot the lead to the cellars. The walls were line with shelves of wine bottles and twice as many barrels. A group of elves worked effortlessly emptying the barrels into glass jars ready to be taken up to the revel. A small stash of baked goods and grain was place by the stairs, like they had been forgotten.

"These barrels should have been sent back to Esgaroth hours ago. The bargeman will be waiting for them." The brass haired elf said as he stepped off the last step. Marie scuttled around and gripped a barrel, watching and waiting.

One elf held up a pitcher, inspecting the deep red contents. "Say what you will about out ... ill tempered king, he has excellent taste in wine." The elf took a long drink from the pitcher. "Come Elros, you must try some."

The elf, Elros, removed the set of keys from his belt and dangled them before himself. "I have the dwarves in my charge."

The other elf simply took the keys and hung them on a hook sticking out from a pillar. "They're locked up. Where can they go?"The two chuckled and set themselves around a table with bread and fruit to accompany the wine. Marie took in the full view of the room, noting a large pile up of empty barrels stacked on their sides to the far side. She crept over and saw a lever and a thin line in the wooden floor underneath the pile. A plan slowly came together in her mind.

She thought back to what the Elros fella had said about sending the barrels back to the bargeman. Bargemen were ferries. Perhaps the elves were like the Brandybucks when returning the empty beer barrels to Haysend down the Brandywine. If they were then Marie's hair brain scheme may just work.

All it required now was less elves around, a drunken jailer and the keys.

'Yes, yes it may just work. Best wait until the appropriate time.'

Drink was the folly of all men.
While waiting in the corner, Marie reflected on her sudden wave of optimism in the last few weeks. She still had moments of doubt but always there still hope. It had become apparent to her that she was generally more hopeful, more than she had been a very long time.

She defiantly wasn't the same hobbit as before. Gandalf had given her a little warning at the very beginning of this whole adventure. She hadn't believed him at the time, but to be fair she didn't expect to run after him and thirteen dwarves the next morning.

'Gandalf the Wandering Wizard ... more like Gandalf the Meddling Wizard.'

There was a loud bout of laughter causing Marie to jump a little. Her mind must have been far in the past to realize how much time had passed in the present. Perhaps she was just tired to notice, she did feel rather ... weighed down.

The other elves working had long since departed back up to the party with the refilled pitchers and Elros and the other elf looking red in the face, though still awake.

'There must something I could do.' She drummed her fingertips against the barrel she was hiding behind, the wood damp from spilt wine.

She turned her attention to the well being for the dwarves, and the basket of loaves near the stairs. She may not have been able to take the keys unnoticed just yet, but she could try for the bread. The elves were sitting in the opposite direction anyway, and their slurred conversation was a good enough distraction.

Marie hyped herself, made her way back to the stairs quickly and swiped three pieces of some kind of flat bread on her way up. She wished she could have grabbed more, but it was too late now, she was half way back up towards the dungeons. She had to be quick or three floating pieces of bread would most certainly attract attention. Or did they too become invisible too? Marie was still unclear how this whole magic business worked.

She had to slow down. Now she was just lethargic. Perhaps prolonged exposure to her ring's magic had a price. It was a relief to slide the band off her middle finger, and she juggled the bread between her hands to pocket the ring.

All that she could hear was the music from the revel, and no oncoming guards. That reassured her that she could go a few minutes without the ring. Just a few.

Marie tore off chunks from the first loaf and left a piece just as far into the cells has she could, two in some cases. Hopefully the dwarves would find the bread before the next round of guards came down. The bread tore easily, indicating a relative freshness that made Marie's hunger worse. There would be enough for the thirteen dwarves but not for her. She shrugged and decided to find food elsewhere if she could.

She came to the last cell where Thorin had been thrown into, the last of the bread in hand. The brooding dwarf sat back against the wall, his head and shoulders slumped forward against his knees as if he were asleep.

Marie could have left the bread at the bars and let him rest.

"Thorin?"

Or not.

He must have been awake since he responded so quickly to her soft call. He unfurled his arms and
stood quickly, his eyes wide with expectation. "What news?"

"I think I have a way out, but we have to wait until the right time." Marie told him. She could see a second of frustration in his eyes. "It should be soon though." She offered the bread. "Here. I doubt you've had anything. It's not much but it's better than nothing and don't worry, I left enough for the others as well." She said quickly before Thorin could question the matter.

His eyes darted between Marie and the food as he reached for it. "Thank you." His words came out mumbled. The portion looked tiny in his hands and Marie wished she could have given more, not just to him but to all her companions. Thorin tore the piece into two and handed one back to her. She tried to refuse but the dwarf insisted.

"You are no good half starved, eat." It was an order more than anything, and Marie complied. Thorin sat back down by the door, his bulky shoulder sliding down the cold stone. He bent his knee and rested a forearm against it lazily. Marie followed his action and sat close to the bars. She took a bite of the bread, her teeth ripping through the light pastry. It was sweet for bread, but it did cure the painful feeling in her stomach quite quickly.

For a moment the pair just ate, sitting in the silence between them with some ease. Marie kept glancing up at the stairs just in case, and pulled her feet in closer to herself. She hissed as she finally registered the sting sensation in her the soul of her feet. They were red raw and scratched up something terrible.

"What day is it?"

"Mmm? Sorry?" She looked over her shoulder at Thorin.

"Did you manage to determine what day it is? Just how long we were stuck in that forsaken forest."

'You mean lost.' "Unfortunately I didn't. All I know is that it's long after sunset, possibly midnight." Marie bit off another piece of bread. "Time seems to be somewhat lost here."

She got a good look at him from the odd angle they both sat on. Thorin's head was tilt back so as staring at her from bellow his dark lashes. He appeared almost ... normal. He had been stripped of his fur coat and armored tunic making him less threatening, in fact his looked slighter with just the dark blue undershirt. His hair was free of the dirt and cobwebs and hung limp around his shoulders. Everything but the eyes looked normal. The remained the same, that sharp liveliness that drew you in with a single glance, that commanded respect when demanded.

"So, this plan of yours." He said, "Are you sure it will work?"

"I ... I am hoping. It's a long shot that will actually work, but still." The sounds of the revel drifted down to the dungeons, "If they keep up with that party of theirs we should be able to slip away."

"And I'm I privy to as what the plan involves?"

"I'd rather wait to see if one aspect will work. If it doesn't I'm back to square one."

Thorin made a sound that was half groan half sigh, his head tilted back to rest against the wall.

Marie finished the tiny meal and listened to the faint music of the revel. It had slowed to a simple melody, a harp from the sound of it. It was a soothing song, and had an ancient timbre to its notes.

"Beautiful." Marie breathed.
She could feel Thorin's scrutinizing gaze on her and she looked back at him. "The music, I didn't mean ... forget it." She shook her head.

Thorin glanced up, "Yes. Quite the ballad. The Tale of the Running River."

"Do you know it?"

"Well enough. It was the first thing my tutor insisted I learn."

This got Marie's attention. "Learn? You play the harp?" A small chuckle escaped her as she said 'harp'.

A smirk played on his lips. "Is that so hard to believe?"

"I don't mean to sound patronizing. The thought never occurred that you would have an interest in an instrument."

Thorin's hand flexed open and closed. "Dwarves have the ability to create. Whether it be weapons to art we are dedicated to the craft. That is our gift from Mahal."

"Were you any good?"

"Acceptable in many respects. I chose the sword and anvil over the harp a long time ago."

"But you never really forget it." Marie said, rubbing her tired ankles.

Thorin looked back at her. "True. The lessons of our elders are the hardest to forget."

Out of curiosity, Marie inspected her own hands. "Most my hands can do is tend a garden ... and pickpocket apparently."

"Mmm. I believe it. You have patient hands"

Marie felt flattered.

"My father said that you have to be patient to make a flower bloom. It takes time for something so delicate to grow and if you rush it you could kill what may have been a unique beauty."

"Wise words, for a gardener. I suspect you admire your father a great deal."

"No more than any child would admire their father."

Marie knew that she should go. She had to make sure that the two elves were still sticking to her plan otherwise there would be problems. Just a few minutes she had thought earlier, well those minutes are up. Maybe a few more. Her hand was already deep inside her pocket, the ring just under her pinkie finger, and between her index and thumb ...

"Huh ...

"What is it?" Thorin sounded a little concerned.

"Oh it's just this." Marie pulled out the copper button. "It's all that's left of my father's best waistcoat." She held it up in the little lighting that they had.

"May I?" Thorin asked. Marie nodded and held the button out for him to take. But he reached though the bars and just took hold of her hand, twisting it gently as he inspected it. His much larger
fingers wrapped around half her hand and her wrist, her skin tingling under their rough touch.

This was ... odd ...

Odd in a pleasant manner.

"It's ..." Marie cleared her throat to get her voice unstuck. "It's somewhat of a good luck charm now."

But Thorin was not looking entirely at the button, but past it and at her.

There was a flash in his eyes.

A spark.

Her pulse quickened, and he must have felt it.

He let her go and pulled his hand back into the cell. "You? In need of luck? You have more luck that even the very best of men could have." He said.

Marie tightened her fingers around the copper piece to stop them trembling.

'Pull yourself together Marie.'

"I suppose that should be taken as a compliment."

"Of the highest regard."

That made her smile. But it was short lived.

There was scuffing of boots from above, which startled the hobbit. She swapped the button for the ring in her pocket quickly.

"I should go." She whispered.

All Thorin responded with was a deep sigh, "If you must." He looked away for a brief moment, no doubt to eye his cell disdainfully. Marie used that second to slip the ring on. A cheap move, but necessary.

"Should this .." But when Thorin looked back, Marie was gone. He sat up a little and looked all around to try and find her, even though she had not moved from her spot. She watched his expression dance between surprise to concern then back again. "Marie?" He called quietly, and it took all of Marie's self control not to respond to it, that and the painful thud that her heart gave.

He slumped back and dropped his head. Was he ...?

Marie stood and, with all the grace of a mouse, tip toed back to the cellars.

No, no, no he couldn't be sad, said the pessimistic half of Marie's mind. Well he had some reason to be sad he was stuck in a cell, but he was defiantly not sad about her sudden disappearance.

But her ever grown optimism was saying 'Perhaps he is fond of your company.'

For once, she wished that only her pessimism to listen to.
Chapter End Notes

Just another trailer made for the Desolation of Smaug section of this fic [here](#).
"Have to move fast, have to move fast, have to move fast, have to move fast." Marie repeated to herself through a clenched jaw. The two elves have finally passed out after another hour from the wine and were sound asleep on the table, one of whom snoring loudly. Marie had to get the keys quickly before they woke or another elf came down to do it for them.

The problem was the hook that the keys hung from was too high up for Marie to reach, so she had to improvise and find something to give her a boost. The only thing she could find was a rather heavy box which hit the floor rather too loudly. Marie panicked and clutched the box, but the drunken elves only stirred their heads and slept on. She wouldn't have been so edging had she not taken off her ring again, leaving her vulnerable.

Marie wasted no time and retrieved the keys, unhooking them with one hand while wrapping around the keys to prevent the unwanted jangling.

She cast one last wary look at the two elves before hurrying back up to the dungeons.

"Have to move faster, have to move faster, have to move faster."

"I'll wager the sun is on the rise!" There was no mistaking Bofur's voice, only it was jolly. "Must be nearly dawn!"

"We're never going to reach the mountain are we?" Came a sad voice from the first cell Marie came across. She stood before it and held up the keys triumphantly to Ori and Dori.

"Not from in here you're not." She said a little louder than usual. All the dwarves heard her and ran to their doors.

"Marie?"

"Well I never, Miss Baggins!"

"How in blazes ..?"

Marie tried to silence them, knowing such a ruckus would attract and elves nearby. She set to work unlocking the doors and letting loose her companions. She earned pats on the back and even an attempted hug from Kili and Bifur, but she had no time for that.

When she made it Thorin's cell, there was a brief pause as she looked at the dwarf, her eyes alive and speaking for her.

'I did it.'

She jammed the right key into the locked and turned it. As she opened the door she leaned away to hush the others again down below, but pulled back when Thorin's hand caught her arm.

"Once again you surprise us Marie."

"You sound as though you expected me to fail."

"Rest assure I never did." He released her arm and headed down the stairs. Marie shook her head and followed along after him.
"Wait not that way." She hissed as the dwarves attempted to squeeze through a narrow passage that went nowhere helpful, Marie had made sure of it. "This way. Down here."

The line of escapees turned and followed her down the mile long stairs, slowing when she indicated for them to. She could slip past the sleeping elves easily but she was lighter and bare foot, the dwarves were, in a nice way of putting it, significantly stockier and wearing enforced boots that always made a noise.

Marie halted the line, made sure one last time the cost was clear, then waved them down. It didn't take long for them figure out just where they were and clearly they had another idea in mind.

Bofur came up close behind her and said in a horse whisper. "Lass what are we doing in the cellars? You're supposed to be leading us out not further in."

"I know what I'm doing." She hissed back and led them to the barrels. They stared at them oddly as she shepherded them to the open ended sides.

"What now?" Fili asked Dwalin, who shrugged.

"Climb in." Marie told them, but they looked like they were having none of it. "Are you mad?" Dwalin pushed past Gloin and Oin and stomped over to Marie. She waved her hands about to stop him, should it wake the elves, but he wasn't paying attention. "They'll spot us, sure as day." He seethed. Under normal situations, Marie would be cringing under his stare but she was still standing on the steps, giving her the height advantage over him for a change.

"Trust me they won't. You just .."

"Do you plan on sealing us in? They'll know and leave us in there to rot."

"That's not the plan ..."

"Better yet they'll burn us."

"Will you let me finish?!" Marie shouted, well as loud a one could when whispering. "Just get into the barrels and I will do the rest."

Dwalin opened his mouth to say otherwise, but Marie did not let a single sound leave him, "Unless you've come up with another brilliant solution in the meantime, by all means share it now ... nothing? Right, into the barrels."

All the dwarves stared at her gobsmacked. Where had that come from?

"Do I need to repeat myself?"

Thankfully she didn't. The dwarves got the hint that she was absolutely serious about her plan and helped each other into the barrels. Marie counted them off quickly then gripped the lever tightly.

"What now Marie?" Bofur stuck his head out of the barrel, as did the others. Had the situation not been so stressful Marie would have found the image beyond amusing. Should they get out of this alive she would let herself have a chuckle at the memory, in the meantime she just said, "Hold on tight ... and hold your breath."

"Why? Hold our ..."

Marie didn't give him time to finish. She clamped down on the lock and pushed the lever. She could almost feel the mechanics below rattling together as the floor beneath the pile tilted opened, letting the barrels and the surprised dwarves within them rolling neatly over the edge and into the cavern bellow. Marie ginned as she head the tell tale splashes as they hit an underground water
channel. She had been right.

The floor tilted back to the proper level and made a muffled clunk, then Marie realized something.

She was still trapped inside.

Her eyes darted at the floor, then to the level, then to the elves stirring at the table.

She nervously licked her lips and gripped her hips

'Didn't completely think that one through did you Marie.'

"Where is the keeper of the keys?!" Came a distant and angry voice, to which Marie started panicking again. They had run out of time. She scrambled over the platform and stamped her foot on it.

'Come on, you have to open up somewhere. Come on, Come on!' She was jumping on it desperately now, and the sound of amour clanking together was getting closer. Marie moved herself a few feet and found the right angle to counter weight the platform. With one last stamp it slow tilted open and Marie was sliding towards her escape. As the floor came further up Marie crouched down to steady her fall, her hand braced on the rising wood. It was a very long drop down and an even harder impact with the cold water, the shock of it knocked the wind out of Marie.

She resurfaced and spat out a mouthful of water. Above her the platform closed and locked itself, or so Marie thought, her sight was distorted from the water in her eyes and hair plastered across them. For a moment she paddling around aimlessly but a hand tugged at her coat, pulling her to a barrel. It was Nori, looking just as worse as she did. "Here Marie, grab on."

Marie hooked one arm over the rim of the barrel and dug her fingers into the rope encircling it, Nori's arm firming around her shoulders. The rest of the barrels were clustered together and kept from moving with the current but Thorin and Fili holding onto the walls and blocking the way.

"Well done Miss Baggins." Marie heard Thorin say, and they stared to float down the channel. Marie helped move the barrel along as best she could, aware that the elves would be in pursuit. The water's speed picked up and the barrels bounced off one another and the channel walls, and Marie. But she knew complaining would do nothing and sucked up the painful thud of wood on flesh.

The water was getting faster ... and faster.

"Hold On!"

Automatically Marie clutched the barrel tighter, but was not fully prepared for what unfolded next. The water rushed onward and over a waterfall plunge, dunking the barrels and dwarves under the river's surface. They resurfaced in what was now a roaring river taking them, hopefully, to the east and their freedom.

The barrel rocked back and forth violently as they raced down the river. Marie tried to keep her head above the water but she could feel the current pulling at her legs. She was lucky Nori was holding onto her jacket or she would have been washed away by the swells.

The river curved and Marie saw that they were approaching a stone dam built to narrow the river down to only a small channel, with four guards posted along it. But that changed when the sound of a horn echoed out from behind them and the guards turned.

They had been spotted.
One guard broke formation and pulled a lever. The dwarves and Marie watched as a pair of metal gates closed off the channel, forcing the barrels to pile up under the dam. The elves drew their swords and Marie thought that they were done for. Out of some vague intuition she too pulled out her own sword, like she could at least try and put up some form of defense.

But she noticed something. Something that was very very very troubling.

Sting's blade wasn't its usual sterling silver.

It was blue.

Glowing blue, which meant one thing.

Marie didn't think they were done for. She knew they were done for. Her voice acted of its own accorded and shouted at the top of her lungs, "Orcs!"

But it was too late. One of the elves dropped and fell head first into the water, a black arrow sticking out of his neck and his murderer standing in his place. The orc screeched and dozens more appeared along the dam, attacking the unsuspecting elves with brutal efficiency. While the elves were kept busy, the rest of the orcs made for the dwarves next.

One jumped across and landed on Nori, but he caught it by the throat to keep him at bay. The orc raised up its axe but Marie stuck Sting into its neck. It fell quickly when she removed the blade. Unfortunately there was more than one orc flinging themselves wildly at them, but the dwarves proved they were just deadly with their bare hands as they were with weapons.

"Get under the bridge!" Thorin barked at them, and Marie felt Nori pushing her away.

"Get Miss Marie under!" He told the others. Marie threw him Sting, "Use this, and don't lose it!"
She told him as was helped into the safety of the underpass. The current helped her through the barrels to the gates, pushing her into the bars with great force. She grabbed onto the first barrel she could, which turned out to be Thorin's, and balanced herself against it with her feet and hands.

"Looks like the Defiler has caught up with us once more." Thorin said.

'It's not Azog.' Marie thought, 'It can't be he's ...' She blinked and stopped her train of thought, flinching as water splashed in her eyes from the wrestling dwarves and orcs. It was just a nightmare after all, how would any of it be true?

She looked out of the gates and saw more in the distance more orcs appearing out of the forest. Even if they could open the gates, they would be face with yet another wave of attacks.

Marie's foot slipped off the barrel and she almost went under the water. But Thorin's hand yanked her up so that they were practically eye to eye. His impressive show of strength matched the pulsing pain in her arm.

There was a popping sound in her ear and suddenly Marie could hear everything. Everything.

Every droplet of water that hit the bars, the grunts of the orcs as they fell victim to dwarvish blows, the crunch of stone, and finally sharp trill of an arrow being shot ... and the piercing of flesh.

Something was wrong. Very wrong. Marie could feel it.

'KILI!' Fili's heart wrenching cry for his brother made both Marie and Thorin's heads turn sharply, a shared feeling of horror between them. A painful cry came from above and Marie felt her stomach sink.
Thorin's grip on Marie loosened "Kili." He uttered, sounding as if the shock was choking his voice. Marie too felt it wrapping tightly around her throat and chest.

"Oh no."

Suddenly the gates began to open and Marie was caught in the rush. They headed over another, much larger plunge and she was slipping easily from Thorin's lax hold. She called out to Thorin but it was too late. He tried reaching out for her but she was lost to the river's unpredictable nature.

Marie saw light and darkness flash before her as she was propelled down into the depths, her lungs starved for air as she tried to find her bearings. A pointless endeavor since she could not determine if she swam to the surface or the riverbed. Once or twice did she manage to find the surface but it was only for a brief second. In that second she spotted the outline of the barrels drowning in the white churns of the river.

She needed to breathe, badly. The agony in her chest was double by the sudden jolt of pain from her left leg, no doubt from a jagged rock in the riverbed. It burned her with pain and she desperately grabbed at anything. Anything to stop her tumbling.

Her linger latched onto harsh granite and Marie immediately pulled herself to it. She broke though the surface with a loud gasp and climbed the rocky edge higher, vomiting out the water she had unintentionally swallowed.

Marie found a moment's respite as she clung to the rock, but it was all to brief.

Something large came crashing down onto her head, beating her face into the rock. A shriek escaped her as fingers laced through her hair and tugged at it, dragging her out of the river and across the rock unceremoniously. Marie screamed and clawed at the grip on her hair but her nails barely scratched the tough skin. Even with all her disorientation she knew that it was an orc pulling her along, its foul stench and horrible black speech gave it away. It pulled her high up off the ground and stuck its face sickeningly close to her's, beetle black eyes narrowing down on her.

It snarled and dropped Marie to the ground harshly, barking out something. Marie's sight readjusted and she saw several dozen orcs running alongside the river shooting at the barrels.

A quick yank and Marie was lifted up again and thrown from one orc to another. Her new capture was much large and easily locked its deformed hand around her neck and left shoulder, squeezing tightly. Marie yelled, kicked, punched, anything to get the orc to let go.

'No, this ... this isn't happening. The others ... no please!' Black spots darted across Marie's eyes as the hand around her throat constricted, completely cutting off her airways and almost breaking her shoulder. Her thoughts became erratic. 'We are so close. What about Kili? Is he hurt? Is he dead? Are they going to die? Balin. Bofur. Ori. Everyone? Everyone?!

With the last of the air left in her lungs, Marie choked out two syllables, "Tho ... rin."

The orc jolted.
Marie thought it was about to snap her neck but through her patchy gaze she noticed something long protruding from either side of the orc's head.

An arrow.

The iron grip around Marie's neck was gone and she was falling again, back into the river. The cold of it did not shock her, in fact she found it almost ... soothing. Her mind was slipping as she felt her body rolling around and around in the cold depths.

'We were so close.'

Then the world went black.
"They're late again."

The sun, long since passed midday, prickled Bard's cheek. It brought little comfort to him. He had been waiting a whole day now for the return of barrels from the elves. But in keeping with their capricious ways there had been no sign of the goods. No doubt they had forgotten and were still feasting away in their mysterious halls.

Bard huffed and patted down his coat as he stood. He had been sitting since daybreak and he'll be damned if he was to continue doing so. The ache in his back shifted and eased a little as pace the length of the pier. All he had to spare himself from the unbearable silence was the scuff of his boot and the distant twittering of birds. It was a sweet sound to the bargeman. There were no birds beyond the boundaries of the once great Greenwood, none had dared to nest near the lands of the Lonely Mountain. Not since the dragon came. But during the last trip he had made across the lake, Bard had thought he'd seen some brave little thrush darting across the sky and towards the mountain. That was a rare sight for anyone of Lake Town.

When he had told his little Tilda of this, she demanded a full account of it. Such a sweet girl, with her thoughts so full of dreams and the stories he and ... his wife had told them. He clasped his hands and rubbed them together.

He did not wish to be kept away from home any longer, leaving his children alone to the mercy of the Master's many prying eyes.

Bard decided to check the banks of the river for any sign of his cargo, stopping only to look back at his barge, or to be more precise the long bow and quiver he had been granted to use. There had been no need for them thus far so it would stand to reason he could go without them ... for now.

He jumped across the rocks easily, following along the safest route he had walked since his youth. He reached the top of his unofficial look out and stared across the river. The water looked particularly darker today, a more foreboding blue than Bard was used to. It made this place he had traveled to for countless years seems almost beautiful for once.

Still no sign of the barrels. A sigh of annoyance escaped him and he gritted his teeth.

'Bloody elves.'

His tired gaze scanned the banks one last time, looking for anything and nothing. He was ready to head back to the pier but out of the corner of his eye he noticed an uncharacteristic ripple emanating from behind a boulder. Bard's curiosity drove him to move, leaping down from his perch and walked towards the boulder with no fear. He rounded it but stopped dead at what he saw.

There was a small body collapsed upon the river bank, limbs tangled in awful angles as it gently rocked back and forth with the water. Judging by the size, Bard assumed it was a child and immediately he reacted. He rushed down and flipped the body over, the child's long hair draped across her face like a dark veil. A pair of pointed ears poked out from the dripping wet locks. "An elf child?" Bard wondered. Elf children were rare even for elf standards, so for one to be found outside the Woodland Realm was a sign of sorts, at least the old wives tales taught as much. He pulled her away from the water as gently as he could, his fingers wrapped around the lapels of the child's over sized jacket as he raised her upper body up to prevent her head from hitting the rocks.
Bard kept a hand rested under the nape of her neck and brushed the hair away. To his surprise, he was staring down at not the face of an elf child, but the mature features of a woman. That caught him off guard and did a double take at the creature lying before him. This woman was no taller than a young child yes, but defiantly had the physic of a regular woman under her humble but tattered clothes. Then there were the feet, which look a size too much for someone so small, and with wisps of hair no less.

After a moment of gawking, it dawned on Bard that the woman was too still ... and she wasn't breathing.

"Come on now." Bard tapped the side of her face, "Come on now lass breathe."

The woman didn't respond. Bard gave her another little shake. "Don't you go dying on me now." He settled her back down on the rock and placed a hand over her collar bone and sternum. "Just open those eyes for me." He pressed down sharply and at last got a reaction. The woman's body lurched and water spurted out from her blue lips. Her throat made a gurgling sound as she cough up the water left in her lungs. Bard turned her on her side to stop her choking on it. "There we go, there's a good lass."

Her haggard breathing was fast and uncomfortable to hear, but in time it slowed. The woman rolled herself onto her back, her body racked with tremors as her eyes darted about. "Easy there, easy." Bard said in a soothing voice one could only gain from fatherhood. "You're alright now."

He felt like the woman was staring into his soul with those eyes, a brilliant shade of green no woman he had ever met possessed. At first they were filled with terror but that terror faded the longer she stared at him, but she soon relaxed.

"What's your name lass? Mine is Bard."

"Ma ... Mar .. rie" She said between strained breaths, "Marie ... Ba .. Bagg ... ins" It pained her to speak so Bard did not press for anything. She groaned and curled herself into a ball. Bard thought she heard a sob coming from her. He carefully picked her up and carried her back to the barge.

"Can you sit?" Bard propped the woman, Marie, onto a stone ledge. She nodded to him and held a hand against her throat, her shoulders rocking back and forth dangerously.

"Tttthhan ... thank you." She muttered.

Bard knelt down so that he was looking up at her. "Now, let's have a look at you." He tilted her chin up, keeping his touch soft so not to startle the poor thing.

There were a few minor scraps on her right cheek and jaw line and also a long cut on her calf muscle, blood dripping down her leg slowly. Bard ripped a piece of cloth already hanging from the inside of coat and patted the cut clean. It was the most he could do, other than keeping this strange little woman from passing out again.

"It may not be any of my business, but it does make me curious." He said. "You seem too short to be neither an elf or mortal, and too tall for a faerie."

The woman, 'Marie you fool, she has a name,' parted her lips to speak but instead a husky cough come out.

"Alright. Take your time." Bard rested his hands on her tiny shoulders. "Don't you be falling over and doing more damage to yourself."

She huffed again, only it sounded more like a chuckle. "I didn't do this to myself."
"Well then. How did you end up in the river?" He inquired. He would get the answers he wanted out of her soon but he would ease them out of her.

"I ... fell." Marie's eyes stared down at her knees.

"Did you now?" Bard didn't believe she was informing him of the whole truth. "You're very lucky to be alive miss. If the water hadn't drowned you it would have frozen you."

"Are ... you always this ..." Marie coughed into her hand, "This chiva ... chivalrous to those you rescue, or just to damsels in distress?"

Bard gave her a lopsided grin. "Only the ones who are pretty."

She did not look flustered by his harmless flirt, but appeared distracted but something else entirely. Her thoughts plaguing her attention until Bard may as well not have been there. He did not take this as sign of rudeness and thought it best to give her room to truly adjust to her surrounds.

He stood, leaving her to sit on the rock, and headed aboard his barge in search for the sheet of tough ram's wool that was a blanket. He would not let a lady freeze, no matter what she was.

"What day is it?"

Bard turned back to the woman, "Half of what's left Highday."

"By which month I mean?" Her hands clenched in her lap, tugging at her pants. There was something frantic in her strained voice. "What date? Is Autumn over yet?"

"Autumn?" Bard asked, confused by her sudden agitation, "Almost. Those only two ..."

"Make for the shore!"

Bard's demeanor snapped to high alert as he heard a stranger's voice coming from the banks, Marie too became alert.

"Stay here Miss Marie."

The bargeman took up his arrows and long bow.

~*~

"Make for the shore!"

A command that was easier said than done. The thirteen drenched and exhausted dwarves paddled their way to the shore. They had long since lost the river's current that had aided their escape and now just idly bobbed along, just the perfect type of target for a blood thirsty orc pack.

Sitting ducks.

The barrels toppled onto their sides as they neared the rocks and the dwarves climbed out in the most awkward of fashions. Bombur of coarse needed assistance thanks to his impressive girth.

It wasn't going to take long for the pack to catch up once they regain their scent. They had no clue
just where they were, no plan formulated to fix their current disposition, no weapons and worse, no
burglar.

What a fine mess this was.

Balin tried to station himself at Thorin's side but the dwarf kept shifting about, as though he was
looking for something. Balin settled for his brother's side. "So what now?"

"We keep moving."

"To where? There is a lake between us and the mountain."

"We have no weapons and that pack will run us down before we even make it half way round." Dwalin said. "Not to mention we're are one member short .."

"I know that." Growled Thorin. He stalked about like a riled up wolf, his face haughty with
frustration. The pained groan from Kili only made him even more tense. The boy fell to his knees,
clutching the darkened patch of blood forming at his thigh.

"Kili's wounded. His leg needs binding." Fili was at his side in a flash.

"Bind it and be quick about it." Thorin's frustration cloaked his concern for his kin. "You have two
minutes."

Bofur helped Fili with the binding and the rest of the dwarves just stood, waiting for someone to
come up with a plan. Thorin could hear the Balin muttering his younger brother.

"This is a turn if ever I'd seen one. And just what has become of Miss Marie?"

Thorin clenched his fists tightly. Marie was missing, again. And this time it was his fault.

His fault that she had been taken by the rapids. His fault that the orc had not plucked, but dragged
her out and away from them to ...

Thorin dared not to think of it. He refused to think of her dead. She had done this before to them,
disappear then suddenly emerge from nowhere. But still, her screams pierced him deeper than a
blade. He had seen only brief glimpses of what had happened. He saw her on the rocks before
being she had been yanked across them like a doll then her neck being throttled by the foul
creatures, but within a second she was gone.

Dragged away or thrown into the river, who knew.

His men were wise enough to give him a wide berth was he continued to pace. As he passed Nori,
he noticed that the locksmith still held Marie's sword.

The foolish hobbit should have kept it for herself. And she had the map and key.

Their quest was tilting upon the edge of a knife.

"No doubt the orcs have her." Dwalin tone was dark, but not without his own concern. "You saw it,
they plucked her out of the river like nothing. Chances are they cut her thr .."

"Brother. Don't." Balin warned him. A good thing to, for Thorin was just about ready to explode.
He started to move away, but his down cast eyes saw something that not just stopped him, but
oddly lifted his spirits.
A small trail of blood.

Thorin followed it towards the river, when in he made another discovery. He practically ran to pick it up, his knees skidding over the harsh rock. He rolled the small object between his fingers. There was no mistaking the rusted coloring, and the imprint of the acorn.

'It's somewhat of a good luck charm now.'

"Dwalin!"

The large dwarf came quickly. "Search the whole area. Everything within a mile."

"Thorin, what ..."

"Just do it." Thorin snapped as he stood, eyes still fixated on the button.

"Thorin."

"What?"

Dwalin was glaring at something behind Thorin. "We're not alone."

The dwarf king turned and saw what he meant. A mortal man stood just above them on a boulder, his a long bow and arrow ready to use on any one of the dwarves, if the look on his face was anything to go on.

Dwalin, being prone to violence first questions later, reacted by grabbing for a weapon a piece of drift wood. But before he could raise it up, the man aimed and fired at it, imbedding the long arrow into the frail wood. Another arrow was fired at the rock in Kili's hand that he had secretly procured. This archer was fast.

"Do it again and your dead." He pointed a third arrow at Thorin. His eyes sharp as his arrows.

"Excuse me," Balin approached the stranger with his hands in the air to show he posed no threat. It did not stop the man from turning his aim onto him. "You're from Lake Town if I'm not mistaken."

The man did not give him an answer.

"They call me Balin. By what name may I call you good sir."

"I'm no sir." The man said, "First tell what you are doing here. Then I may not kill you."

"Wait!"

That voice. Thorin stepped forward, "Can it be?" He murmured.

He was not the only one to react to voice. The man lowered his bow and turned his head to look back over his shoulder. Balin took this chance to get closer to the man, or so Thorin thought.

"Miss Marie, is that you dear?"

"Balin?! Yes I'm alright!" He reply came in a horse tone. Thorin moved quickly and headed towards the source. He wasn't the only one. Bofur, Nori and Dwalin follow along behind him. Kili tried to move, but his injured leg slowed him. Fili stayed back to help him.
The archer let them pass, but did not uncock his arrow just yet.

Standing along on an old stone pier was a shaking Marie Baggins, thankfully in one piece. Her gaze met with Thorin's and the dwarf found himself slowing with his approach. Bofur and Nori passed him and got to Marie first, who enveloped them both with relieved hugs.

"Bless my soul. Lass you're alive and breathing."

"Gave us a scare there again." Nori handed back her sword.

"Thank goodness you're all alright." She said as the others encircled her. Thorin's feet felt like lead as he dragged them along, his own guilt adding to the weight of them.

"Kili. Your leg." The hobbit rushed towards the youth, but not without limping. Kili pulled free from Fili's hold and caught her in his arms.

"I'm fine, it's nothing Marie." He told her. A blatant lie.

Marie pulled away and clutched his face, "You recklessly brave boy." She chided, with a smile on her face, "Scared me to death you did."

"You're one to talk."

She simply smiled and turned her attention to Fili and Balin.

"I take it Miss Marie that you know these ... dwarves?" Thorin glanced behind him as the archer approached, placing his unused arrow back into the tattered quiver on his back. Marie freed herself from Balin's snowy beard. "Yes they are ..." Her violent coughing fit startled the dwarves. "They are my traveling companions."

Balin rubbed her back as she coughed again. "You have our gratitude sir for helping Miss Baggins." The old dwarf turned his ever knowing eye to Thorin. "We would have truly been lost without her."

Thorin bit the inside of his mouth.

Marie turned to him and offered him her gentle smile, one that he was certainly not entitled to but grateful for none the less. He was surprised when her arms came around his neck he was pulled down to her level.

"The key and map are safe." She muttered into his ear, her voice like a humming bird against the skin. She had misplaced to look on his as concern for his possessions rather than for her herself. Regardless her reassuring hold on him did release the pent up fury in him slowly. He wrapped an arm around her, resting his hand just at the curve of her waist. He did not let the affection last for too long, and neither did Marie. Her small hands slid out from his back and pushed him back upright as he let his arm drop.

Meanwhile Balin and turned to the archer and said in a simple friendly tone. "If I may ask, your barge. It wouldn't be for hire would it?"

Bartering and finding suitable agreements for the dwarves was always something Balin excelled in. His calm nature made it easy for others to at least hear what he had to say, and his otherwise portly and older statue disguised the seasoned warrior true potential.

But for all the charm he mustered, the Lakeman seemed immune to it. He listened to Balin talk as
he moved the damaged barrels from the shore to the barge but denied their request for passage, food and weapons each time, justifying it with some matter concerning the Master and his tradings with the elves.

They did not have time for this, and Thorin was sorely tempted to mention the impending threat of the orc pack. But such information would only sour their chances. Between watching Balin lie about their intentions and the man fussled over his quarry, Thorin's gaze fell on Marie. She had wedged herself between Bofur and Bifur while the company waited for an outcome. Her hand kept coming up and resting gingerly at her collar and neck, her eyes drooping before she would right herself. She looked like she was about to collapse.

When Balin looked back at Thorin, he mouthed 'Offer him more'. They had to get to Lake Town.

"I'll wager there are ways to enter that town unseen." The old dwarf said.

That must have interested the man. He paused in his work to contemplate before carrying on. "Aye. But for that you would need a smuggler." There was a subtle smugness about his words, something Balin picked up on.

"For which we'd pay double. Fifty silver pieces." A steep price for the dwarves, but it was finally enough to entice the Lakeman into their services.

"Fifty pieces?" He raised a dark eyebrow at Balin.

"No more no less, upon my word as an honest dwarf."

"Are you then?" The Lakeman straightened his back a casted a weathered eye over the sorry portrayal of the company. "Very well then." He and Balin shook hands.

"Whoa whoa lass. Lass?"

Thorin snapped his head around. Marie's legs had given way and she slumped against Bofur, who caught her quickly before she could fall. "What's the matter?"

"Is she alright?" Ori asked.

"I'm ... I'm fine." Marie told him, but her voice betrayed her. Her head fell forward before she jerked it back up.

"Just when was the last time you got any sleep Lass?"

"Bring her aboard." The Lakeman told them, "I feared she would black out again."

'Again?' Thorin's anger flared up once more.

Bofur scooped up the hobbit and carried her bridal style onto the barge. The Lakeman pointed to the bow, "Set her there. There should be a blanket." Bofur did so and wrapped her up tightly to ward of the cold.

As the dwarves piled onto the barge, Oin and Thorin took Bofur's place at Marie's side. The Lakeman made the last of the preparations to set sail, with the added and reluctant assistance of some of the dwarves.

"Exhaustion." Oin said, "She needs her rest more than anything, and a good feed like the rest of us."
"I am alright." Marie protested and tried to sit up.

"No you don't Miss. As a man of medicine I am ordering you to be still and close your eyes." Oin placed a hand on her shoulder to stop her but withdrew when she flinched, her face contorted with pain.

"You get her to stay put while I tend to the lad." Oin told Thorin before crossing the crowed deck to find Kili.

Thorin stepped closer. Marie made another try to sit but was blocked by Thorin.

"You heard Oin."

Marie head lolled from side to side, like she was shaking her head to him. "I will no ... not be ... I will ..."

"Shh." Thorin hushed her. "Sleep." He stopped her head from shaking with a light touch of his hand.

Whatever her response it was lost amongst her mumblings as she stilled and succumbed to sleep, her breathing constricted and sharp to hear. Thorin's thumb brushed along her brow, offering his own comfort to her.

"You've done well Marie."
There was something about a dreamless sleep, something soothing in a strange way. Marie found absolute peace for however long she slept, and it was wonderful. Even with the hard wooden surface she was curled up on and the itchy blanket tucked in tightly around her, she was lulled back by the gentle rocking. That is until an icy breeze brush across her nose. It chilled and tickled her skin. She wriggled her nose to ward off the cold but it persisted until Marie felt to sensation of a sneeze building up.

Her hand pulled out from the tangled mess of her blanket to cover the sneeze, but the power of it made her neck explode with fresh pain that shattered her sleepy state. She stopped herself from groaning and sat up, clutching the tender skin.

'Oh this is going to bruise badly.'

She took a deep breath and rubbed her eyes. Might as well stay awake and find out what she missed. It was impossible to tell what hour it was thanks to the harsh grey hue of the mist, thick and impossible to see through. The sun may have been right above Marie's head and she wouldn't know any different. The lack of shapes beyond the two sides of the barge made her believe that they were quite possibly in the middle of the lake.

She swung her leg over the edge of the tiny seat she had been laying across, her feet knocking across a warm body. She pulled them back up and glanced down at who she had kicked by accident. It was Dori, but he made no movement to suggest that he felt it at all. He was huddle with Ori and Nori while the rest of the dwarves were scattered around the little room they had between the barrels. All but Thorin and Dwalin were asleep. Well she assumed it to be them. A large figure was hunched over one of the barrels with his back to Marie. She could see very little but there was no mistaking that bald tattooed covered head.

Dwalin.

Thorin was pacing the length of the barge slowly. It had to be him, the rhythm of his strides gave him away. The mist enveloped him until Marie saw only a silhouette of the dwarf king. It frightened and intrigued her.

Marie, keeping in mind the dwarves below her, stood up carefully on the cold wooden deck. She took a moment to stand. No dizziness, no jelly legs. She was whole. Whole, but freezing. She tucked her hands under her arms and treaded quietly across the deck. Something knocked against her hip. Her sword, back in its place. She couldn't remember putting it there. It mattered little now. There was however something she was forgetting, and her something within her did not like that she had. It grated at her mind like a plough overturning the earth.

Marie came up beside the burly warrior, whose gaze was fixed squarely onto the back of the shadowy outline of the back of the barge.

"Dwalin?" Marie said quietly, just in case he should be startled. But the dwarf lowered his chin slightly, "Aye lass, I know you're there. Nice to see you on your feet again." His head cocked towards her but his eyes didn't move. His growling tone must have caught Thorin's attention, for...
Marie saw his figure stop his pacing. He turned and walked around the barrels towards them, Marie met him halfway along the narrow path between the cargo and the low sides of the barge.

"Hello." Marie couldn't help the apologetic edge her voice held. She looked up into his eyes, expecting to see ... what was she expecting? "How are you feeling?"

"I feel that it would be more appropriate for me to be asking you that." Thorin brace a hand on a barrel.

"Doesn't mean I can not ask you all the same. I am ... well, if you would care to know."

"Of course I would."

Marie's eyes fell from his and settled on the chunks of ice flouting alongside the barge. "I'm touched." As she spoke her hand disappeared into her back pocket.

She had remembered what had been bothering her. She hadn't check for her ring. Before her cold fingers round the gold band, they skimmed across the crumpled parchment of the map. Her priorities were torn between the selfish want for her ring and returning the map and key to their rightful owner now that they were out of Mirkwood.

As painful as it was, she chose the latter. She hooked her middle finger around the iron key as her thumb and index finger pinched at the parchment and she pulled both out in one go. "These might be better kept in your hands now." She said, smoothing out a creased corner with her other hand. It was amazing that the map was still in a sound condition.

She held it and the key out for him, with a crooked smile.

His thumb brushed over hers as he took them, but as they made contact a look of worry came over him briefly. "You're cold."

Marie pulled her hand away sharply. "Yes, well," She run her thumb along the pads of her fingers, "It is a little nippy out."

"Here." Thorin had pocketed the map and key and grabbed her hand. It fitted neatly in his hold as he placed his other hand it to preserve the heat. This surprised Marie immensely, but none the less grateful. The heat of his hands slightly rubbing hers spread all the way up her arm and crept over her shoulder, tempting her to slide her other hand into his hold. And she did.

"What happened after I ... well fell asleep?" She asked in a quiet voice.

"The men took quite a beating from the river and that damned orc pack, but otherwise they are sound."

"And Kili? His leg ..?"

"He'll live."

Marie looked back at the sleeping dwarves. The youngest set of brothers were resting against the sides with Kili's head upon his brother's shoulders. His closed eyes looked hollow and were an off colour, the crude knot around his leg was already filthy. Marie ran her tongue along the roof of her mouth, tasting something acidic, "And you?" She turned back to Thorin, "Are you alright?"

He answered with another question.
"Was it your intention to half drown my men Miss Baggins?"

"What? No of course not. I was only ..." Marie twitched her nose, "I hadn't really planned the escape beyond the whole barrel thing. I was too please it actually worked." She admitted.

"And here I was thinking that you were doing it to make us men suffer."

Marie was somewhat shocked at such a statement. "Why on earth would you think that? Has your opinion of me lowered for having you sail down a river in barrels?"

"I mean no offense to you Marie. My opinion of you remains ... steady." His fingers did tighten ever so slightly around her knuckles when he spoke. The barge gave a jolt as one of the ice chunks bounced off the side harshly, the old wooden hull groaning as it swerved to the right. Thorin's hand slid up Marie's wrist and clasped her forearm to steady her.

She looked behind the dwarf to the back of the barge, where dark figure looming in the mist manned the quant pole, the bargeman.

'So that's what Dwalin was eyeing off.' Marie slipped her hands out from Thorin's and tried to pass around him. But she was stopped with a swift yank on her elbow.

"What? I can go a few steps without falling over the side you know." Marie huffed, but Thorin wasn't listening. His was glaring at the bargeman just as Dwalin did and pulling her away, or rather into him. Marie twisted her arm up so that she was gently pushing him away. "Thorin Please." He finally looked back down at her with his all too familiar distant gaze. "It will be fine." Marie's fingers splayed out across his chest and she could feel his heart pulsing under the coarse shirt. Each beat was like a drum resonating in the cavern of his chest. Marie had to stop her hand from quivering, but luckily for her Thorin's iron fingers released her arm.

He practically stomped away from her.

Marie let her hand slide back into her pocket, only for a second, before shuffling towards the back of the barge. Soon she found herself staring at a pair of shabby boots on a platform.

"You're awake Miss."

Marie knew that voice, from a vague moment in time calling out of her unconscious state.

She lifted her gaze so that could look at the face of the bargeman through the mist.

"Um yes. Good morning ugh .. Bard? It is morning is it?"

He nodded to her. "Yes. The sun is just on its way up." There was a gentle level of concentration about him as he maneuvered the quant pole slowly. He was a seasoned bargeman at home on the water, but oddly Marie thought that they way he held himself was something akin to how Thorin did, something almost noble, regal. "I trust you slept well. You hardly so much as wiggled when your dwarves brought you onboard."

"Very." Automatically Marie's attention turned to 'her' dwarves. "I hope you haven't been awake all night on our account."

"I had to make up for lost time regardless Miss Marie. And besides, it would not be the first time I have sacrificed sleep."

Marie felt about for the edge of the platform he stood on, her gaze firmly on him the whole time.
"I want to properly thank you for saving me ... and for helping us."

"I did what any half decent man would do for a woman." Bard lent back and pulled the pole into his body, the barge tilting to the left and the sail picked up a gust of wind coming across the lake. "But I will not deny that the promise of payment encouraged my disobedience."

"At least you're an honest man." Marie rested against the platform, tucking her hands into her coat. "You mention you had children. I'm sure that too plays a factor in this."

"A very large one."

"Are they still young? Or are they on the cusp of adulthood?"

"Far too young to be grown, but no more can they hold onto the innocence of childhood." Bard's face became hard and Marie saw his fingers dig into the pole. "Especially my eldest girl. She had to become a mother to too young an age."

"No one can prepare us for them moment we are no longer children." Marie asked no more and waited for how he would proceed. She would not make him speak of his family unless he wanted to. Perhaps she may meet them herself and have her questions answered then.

"You still haven't answered my question Miss."

"Mmm? Sorry?" Marie blinked up at him. Had he asked her something?

He offered her the same lopsided smile he had given her before. "Excuse the bluntness of it but what exactly are you? You are no dwarf, elf or human."

"I'm a Hobbit, from the Shire." Marie wondered how many more times must she repeat the fact. "I believe the term that would also be appropriate is a Halfling."

"I have never head of the Shire."

"It may be called something else this side of the world, but is in the west, beyond the Misty Mountains."

"You are a long way from home Miss Marie."

"That I am." She said to herself.

"What brings you so far East?" Bard asked. "What is your common ground with the dwarves?"

Marie was a little stuck. She recalled back to Balin's little story about merchants and the Iron Hills. How would she fit in this tale? She didn't wish to lie to the man who saved her life, yet she had her loyalties to the company and their secrets. No doubt Thorin would be listening, waiting to hear her response too.

Perhaps she could just tell truth ... with a little embellishment.

"There's an old saying amongst my folk back home. 'Never go far from the green of home and trouble will never find you.' We are taught that from a very early age, our one unbreakable rule." How she hated that saying as a child.

"What made you break the rule?"

"It was the one rule I wanted to. I always wanted to come east, but time just ... got away and I knew
that if I didn't do it now, I would spend my remaining years yearning for it. It just so happens that this company was traveling though town, so I invited them to dinner and the next thing I knew ... I was on the Great East Road far from the green of home."

"Well you may have gotten more than you intended with this lot." Bard said warily.

Marie shrugged, instantly wishing she hadn't due to the sharp pain in her shoulder and neck. "Perhaps. But I do not regret my decision." That was the honest truth, with no added flare of charm to it. "If I regret anything it's not having the endurance of my youth once more."

"Well you are not lacking in the beauty of youth."

"Oh my, is my savior wooing me?" Marie felt a chuckle weaving through her words.

"Pardon me if I cross boundaries."

"It's alright. Heavens, it's been an age since I've been wooed."

Her cheek was lost soon enough when she was overcome with the sense of this being wrong. Thorin could probably hear every word that had passed between them. Bard was not looking at her when her smile fell, but out onto the lake as the mist eased a little.

"We're almost nearing Lake Town." He said.

"How can you tell?"

"I know the winds and currents. They are all I need to know my way. Should the mist clear up some more we may even glimpse the Lonely Mountain."

Marie's back straightened. "Really?"

"Aye."

The hobbit gave herself a little push off the platform and walked closer the sides. "Don't expect to spy it from here just yet Miss Marie." She heard Bard say. "Or do hobbits have keener eyes than an elf."

"No, we're as ordinary as the big folk." Marie glanced back at him, "Unless you are different here in the East."

Bard may have been just smiling but Marie could tell he was laughing heartily on the inside.

The niggling sensation returned and she looked out at nothing in particular.

Their banter was harmless enough yet it she was left feeling the stinging reminder of betraying one's trust, but Marie couldn't understand why and just whom she betraying.

She had reconciled the fact the Alistair was gone for some time now ...

'No. No, no, no really Marie? Really now.' She ducked her head to hide her eyes as they glanced over at Thorin, whose back was to her. A string of errant curls brushed her burning cheek. 'Him?' The thought sent an exotic feeling through her, horrifying her yet exciting her as it festered low in her belly, tickling her two lower ribs.

That was a new sensation.
Thorin really did appear kingly standing tall by the barrels, head held high and proudly.

Marie cupped her cheek, pulling at the side of her frown with her palm as her fingers scrapped her temple. Her own pulse brought back the memory of Thorin's steady heart beneath her finger. 'Nonsense. Utter nonsense. What am I'm thinking? Were his shoulders always that broad? NO! Marie, for goodness sake.'

The stirring of the dwarves provided the distraction Marie needed to settle her feelings. There were many groans and utterings in their secret dwarvish tongues, all the better for Marie to focus on. Anything to distract her mind from wondering just what it may be like to be wooed by a dwarf.

Chapter End Notes

Heads up. Bit of a time skip in the next chapter.
'I swear if I ever write a book this will not be included.' This is what Marie promised herself as she pulled the dry blanket closely around herself. As charming as Bard was his method of smuggling left much to be desired, namely the use of fish being used as a cover and a short journey up a toilet.

But, given the circumstances Bard did all that he could to get them in unseen, for the most part, and now offered his home, his clothes, and his food to them. Marie believed him to be a man of his word and now trusted him completely. The dwarves were not so forgiving for the impromptu swim through Lake Town's sewage system, mostly Dwalin who refused to mention it ever again.

"They may not be the best fit, but they'll keep you warm." Bard told them as his daughters went around with the piles of thick coats and furs for them to replace their tattered or lost garments. Marie loathed to be parted from her red coat but it had been utterly ruined by the river. Even her shirt, once white and crisp, was now stained with the foul color of pale brown. The youngest, Tilda, came up beside her with a new coat for her and a small smile for her.

"Thank you." Marie said and awkwardly took hold of the coat. The child lingered a little longer with an abundance of curiosity in her eyes and a multitude of questions on her lips, but Bard moved her along with a gentle pat on the shoulder before any could escape her. Marie folded the blue coat neatly and placed it by her side.

"Couldn't feel me right foot there for a while." Nori grumbled as he placed his large boots by the tiny hearth. Bifur in turn muttered into his beard something in his native tongue and violently clapped his hand across his shoulder, but stopped when he noticed Marie watching him and went back to staring at the fire in silence.

"Are you a faerie?"

"I beg your pardon?" Marie shook her head as Tilda popped back into sight.

"A faerie." The innocence of the child's question thawed Marie's frozen bones, "Da found you in Mirkwood didn't he? Did the elves steal your wings?"

Sigrid, the elder girl, rushed over,"Tilda, please." The girl looked up at her older sister with a pout. "She is our guest." Marie new that tone, her own father had used it on countless occasions when entertaining visitors. Tilda nodded and shuffled away from the hobbit.

Marie stood and walked around the modest table crowded by the shivering dwarves. The eldest of the bargeman's children fussed about the full household moving things about to accommodate her surprise guests whilst keeping her sister out of the way. For someone so young she already had terrible case of crow feet around her eyes. 'Poor dear.' Marie thought. She looked like she was about to pass out from surprise when the fourteen strangers emerged from the toilet, then again Marie knew exactly what must be going through her mind at that moment.

Bards only son Bain was on look out by the windows. Apparently Bard had somewhat of a reputation of crossing the will of the Master, the long standing proprietor of Lake Town as Bard had briefly explained before stuffiing them back into the barrels. Bain by the look of him knew just who to be looking out for as he peeled back the stained linen curtains an inch.
He had very little of his father's baring, but he had his eyes no doubt that.

A throbbing pain went down Marie's neck and shoulder, bringing her out of her musing. She hid her hand under the blanket and touched the sore skin. As she did, she spotted their leader, standing by one of the windows brooding again.

She was handed a mug of tea by someone, she could not recall who, for her eyes seemed fixed on Thorin's profile. In all the time she had known him she had never fully taken in his complete appearance. She couldn't help it now, but it would seem that she compelled to do it regardless what she told herself. She even put the mug to her lips stared into the brown brew to look away, the liquid scolding her tongue.

Marie's head snapped up as a breathy voice reached her ear, making her choke on her tea when she realized it was Thorin. His eyes were wide as he stared out the window so earnestly, Marie couldn't help but creep over and see what he stared so intently at.

"You ... say something?"

Thorin nodded towards the top of a watch tower high above the houses through the open window. At the top there was a strange looking statue, appearing to Marie like bent back iron. She squinted and corrected herself. It wasn't a statue, but a large weapon.

"A Dwarvish Wind Lance." Thorin said again, his baritone voice heavy with memory.

"I take it you haven't seen one of those in years." Marie said offhandedly.

"No lass." Marie turned and found Balin standing behind them, his beard still a sad mess from the river. "The last time we saw such a weapon, a city was on fire. It was the day the dragon came."

Thorin's eyes fell to the window ledge, and Marie thought she could see the fire dancing in his eyes as Balin explained further.

"It was the day that Smaug destroyed Dale. Girion, the lord of the city, rallied his bowmen to fire upon the beast. But a dragon's hide is tough, tougher than the strongest armor. Only a Black Arrow fired from a Wind Lance could have pierced the dragon's hide."

Marie glanced back at the Windlance, imagining a large metal arrow being launched by the strong cord taunt at the base. Or at least that's how she imagined it.

"But few of those arrows were ever made, and the armoury was running low when Girion made his last stand."

It was clear to Marie what the ending to this tale would be. Girion tried to strike down the dragon, and Girion failed.

"Had the aim of men been true that day ... much would have been different." Thorin murmured, turning his head down to look at Marie.

"No one can be sure of what could have been." The words tumbled out of her mouth, and she immediately berated herself for letting them.

Thorin took no offense nor delight in what she had said, in fact he just stared at her blankly as though she had said nothing. His mind was seemed elsewhere. 'Perhaps,' Marie thought, 'He is seeing the ash and smoke in the sky.'
"You speak as though you were there." Bard said, making the trio turn to him.

"All dwarves know the tale." Thorin said blankly.

Marie turned the cup in her hand 'Some are a part of it.'

Bain, who had been hovering around Bard like a shadow, step out from behind his father. "Then you would know that Girion hit the dragon. He loosened his scales under the left wing, just one more shot and he would have killed the beast."

While Marie took this added portion to the story with all seriousness, the most the boy got in response was a chuckle from Dwalin. "That's a faerie story lad. Nothing more."

Bard placed a hand on his son's shoulder in reassurance.

"You took our money, where are the weapons?" Thorin pushed passed Marie and placed himself before the bargeman with his usual pride which verge on arrogance.

The two just stared for a moment, and Marie feel the tension elevated in the cramped room.

"Wait here." Bard finally said, and head downstairs to the open platform bellow the house, Thorin and Dwalin glaring at him as he went.

All Marie could do was sip her tea while Thorin, Balin and Dwalin congregated in a tight circle. Fili and Kili wedged themselves between their uncle.

"We can not stay long here." She heard Dwalin growl.

"Aye, we are nought but out of time to be delayed again."

It did not take long for Marie to look up over the rim of the mug at the king. He was always broad and intimidating to her, but she had never appreciated the elegance of his countenance when he was in deep thought, the long angle of his hooked nose casting a shadow across his deep set cheeks that were so carefully lined by his black beard, how noble he was regardless of his current state. Certainly not anything like the men of the Shire, all round and dimply. No Thorin was different, but in a good way. He was daring, strong and ...

'Marie for all that is sacred, control yourself.'

She was ... overwhelmed, to put it mildly, by her new found fascination with Thorin and the conflicting feelings that came along with it. It took all of her Baggins half to repress them. She went to drink again but remembered she had long since finished the tea, and did the sensible thing of placing it on the table.

Kili slowly withdrew himself from the circle without arousing the notices of the others, not even Fili, and edged himself into the far corner. Marie watched his expression falter under the pressure of pain in his leg.

As shallow as it was, this was the distraction Marie needed.

She quietly joined Kili in the corner, pressing a hand on his shoulder to let him know she was there. "You alright?" She asked. Kili still jolted at the sound of her voice. Perhaps her touch had been too light.

"What, yeah yeah I'm alright. Never better."
Marie did not believe him and frowned.

"You'll get wrinkles doing that."

"I already have enough. You should sit." She said and looked at his leg, "You leg is ..."

"It's alright Marie."

"It isn't, now sit."

Kili gave in and sat in a poorly built window box, taking his time to sink into the limp cushion. Marie took hold of his arm and helped him down, muttering mild words of encouragement.

"Let's have a look at you." Marie threw off the blanket and tossed it to the side, the cold forgotten to her. She brushed back his fringe and felt his skin. It was clammy to the touch and his brown eyes couldn't focus clearly. However his condition did not hinder the speckles of pink dusting his cheeks.

"Miss Sigrid." Marie caught the girl's arm as she brushed past, "I don't mean to trouble you but, you don't perhaps have any spare linen we can use?"

"Ugh ... perhaps. I'll check." She glanced between Marie and the wound before scuttling off.

Bard returned at that moment carrying the promised weapons in a long strip of black leather, glistening with water. Marie made the mild assumption that they had hidden been under the house. The dwarves stood as Bard unwrapped the bonds and revealed the contents.

Marie rose to get a glimpse. The weapons were no more than old broom handles with old blades and hooks hammered into the ends, some were rusted chains with wooden blocks either end. Not the type of weapons Marie had in mind and judging by the sneers the dwarves gave them, not what they wanted.

"What is this?" Thorin seethed as he picked up the first tool. It was odd looking, but to Marie it looked dangerous enough.

"A Pike Hook, made from an old harpoon." Bard answered as he handed a large black hammer to Fili

"And this?"

"A crow bill, we call it. Fashioned from an old smithy hammer. It's heavy in hand I grant but in defense of your life, these will serve you better than none."

The dwarves were clearly not impressed. Gloin slammed the spear he was toying with onto the table. "We paid you for weapons. Iron forged swords and axes."

"It's a joke." A collective 'aye' went about the company and Marie eyed each one if them, appalled at such manners to man helping them. "They look sturdy enough." She said loudly so that they could hear her over the clattering of tool being tossed back onto the table

"This matter is beyond your concern lass." Gloin shook his head at her, "A gardening hoe will do no damage in a fight."

"Give any woman a gardening hoe and see just how much damage she can do."

Gloin actually looked disturbed by the minor threat the little hobbit had given him, as did several
of the other dwarves.

Bard, unaware of the out of character spout from Marie, went about explaining the circumstance as best he could. "You won't find better outside the city armory. All iron forged weapons are held there under lock and key."

This did nothing to help convince the dwarves. Only Balin kept a more positive response and advised his king to do the same. "Thorin, why not take this offer and go. I've made do with less and so have you."

Marie could practically hear Thorin's jaw locking.

"I say we leave now."

"You're not going anywhere."

That caught Marie off guard. Bard didn't intend to keep them imprisoned here did he? That wouldn't be like him, but then again Marie had only known the man for a single day. "There are spies watching this house and probably ever wharf and doc in the town. You must wait until nightfall." While the dwarves left out an audible groan, Marie slowly let out a breath of relief, making sure she didn't strain her neck. Balin took Thorin to the side to council him, with Bard watching them carefully. There was something about Bard's gaze that sparked Marie's worry. He was staring intently at Thorin, as if fighting for recognition of something, creating deep lines across his brow. After a few moments he stopped and made for the front door, his head downcast as he exited the house.

A hiss came from behind Marie and remembered the task she had appointed herself to. Kili was clutching at his thigh tightly and had lost more coloring in his cheeks.

"Sorry Kili, I was a little sidetrack." She spotted a bowel and a bundle of white linen cloth next to him on the seat. Sigrid must have placed it down there while her back was turned.

"It's alright Marie. It really is not...Agh!" He yelped when she lightly pressed on the wound.

"It does not look alright. Just let me re bandage this." She was already undoing the strips wrapped around his leg before he could say yes or no. The filthy bandage was stained with dirt and clotted blood, make Marie cluck her tongue. "No wonder you're in discomfort, it will not heal like this."

"I will be fine."

"The more you tell me that, the less convincing you sound."

The last of the strips peeled away, exposing the wound to Marie. It wasn't bleeding, but most certainly infected. Marie rubbed her hands together to warm then up, nothing worse than cold fingers on tender skin. "This may sting a little." She took a piece of linen and dabbed it in the water.

Kili made no noise as she cleaned away the clots, but his hand still trembled at his side with every stroke.

"How bad is it?" A new voice asked behind her.

"I don't know Fili. It's a deep wound but this ..." The skin had turned black and appeared to be spreading up his leg. "This wound feels ... evil." An uneasiness crept up her spine, and the faintest whispers crossed her mind.
"What's that love?"

Marie crushed the bloodied cloth between her fingers. "Nothing ... nothing at all. Here pass me that for me Fili."

The dwarf helped her dress out his brother's leg, even tried to keep the mood up buy talking about some job he and Kili had down for a trader. Marie was completely out of the loop as they boys chattered and just politely nodded accordingly once and awhile, not letting on the weight in her back pocket.

'There,' She inspected her work one last time. *That should do for now. Perhaps Bard has something in case that fever should turn.* She looked down at her fingers, smeared with dark blood before sinking them into the bowels of water at her knees.

"We are leaving." Announced Thorin.

The dwarves were only too happy to agree and got to work retrieving their new coats.

"Wait you can't." Bain tried to say, "Da will be back soon. He can ..."

"Lad, do yourself a favor and don't try to stop us." Dwalin threatened the boy, who did the smart thing and heeded the warrior's words.

Marie got to her feet quickly once she had processed what was happening around her and walked over to Thorin. "Is that wise? You heard what Bard told us."

"Aye I heard, but I have made my decision. The sun is setting anyway, we will use the twilight."

Maire had not noticed the dying sunlight. "But Thorin ..."

"But nothing. We need proper tools to fight a dragon, not pitchforks." His voice dropped to a whisper.

"As unfair as you condemnation for Bard's lack of quality materials is, that is not what I'm getting at. Kili is in not fit capacity to travel yet."

"He can stand, that is ..."

"Have you even looked at him?" Marie grabbed his forearm, "He's your nephew, your blood."

"And a member of this company." This was all Thorin needed to justify himself. It would have been much easier for Marie to be angry with his disregard for Kili's state if his harsh expression did not quip at her attraction for him. Now she was just conflicted, whether either admirer the dwarf's fiery will of to hate his stubborn pride.

Thorin gave her no chance to pick when he pulled himself away.

Marie twitched her nose and reluctantly prepared for their departure, snatching up the blue coat she had folded up.

'Men.' She thought, shaking her head.
care for a little angst anyone?
The night air was beyond cold in Marie's mind, even her tough hobbit feet were going numb. It didn't help that she was being pushed along by Bofur at keep up with the sneaking dwarves. The poorly kept structures allowed for plenty of nooks and crannies for them to cover them, but all the same Marie followed along with reluctance she hadn't felt since the early days of the quest.

Something felt wrong about this, but Marie couldn't put together just what made it so. Either way she had been roped into another burglary attempt. It would have been simple enough to use her ring and sneak into the armory, but two problems prevented this. One the armory was locked as Bard had told them, two the dwarves were adamant that they would pull off this heist themselves regardless.

The company circled the armory until they found an opening for them, a unlocked window three stories up.
"How are we going to get up there?" Marie grumbled.

Bofur heard her, "Aren't you the expert climber?"

"Trees allow for more than the side of a house."

"Quiet." Thorin growled at the two.

Marie rolled her eyes. They were making more noise than her with their breathing than she was whispering.

"Fili, Bomber, Dwalin. There." Thorin pointed to the base of the armory wall and the three dwarves huddled against it, bent over like a game of leapfrog. But when Bifur and Dori jumped onto their backs and assumed a similar pose Marie understood just what they were doing. A dwarf ladder. Odd, but not as odd as other things Marie had seen.

"Nori, you go first."

"Guards." Balin warned them and company ducked down behind the piles baskets stacked along the dock's edge. Two armored men with spears strolled by at their leisure, one mumbling about his mother in law with a scowl.

"We're fortunate there's not a battalion on patrol." Balin whispered.

"Once we have the weapons, we'll make straight for the mountain."

Nori made for a run up at the pile of dwarves and leapt up their backs to grab the window ledge. Fili gave him a boost to get him up and over and Nori disappeared into the house.

A few seconds passed before his hand shot up and gave them the all clear.

"Your turn Miss Baggins." Thorin's hand came up and gave her a little push, but it was met with resistances on Marie part. She got a baffled glare from Thorin.

"Give me a moment." She said, adjusting the heavy belt around her hips. The coat proved too heavy for Marie's liking and made her movements awkward. She wasn't quite sure she would make the window. She moved Sting to sit behind her and ran. Fluidly she moved up the pile and latched her fingers onto the window ledge but Fili miss timed and boosted her up too soon, sending her
tumbling into the dark room.

"Oh bloody hell." She grumbled, rubbing her bruised behind as she stood.

"Shhh. Over here Miss Marie." She heard Nori whispered from further in. She followed his voice and came upon a row of axes and short swords. "Just what the doctor ordered this." The thief pointed at the weapons.

"I don't recall a man of medicine condoning sharp bits of iron on sticks."

"Someone is a tad cranky."

Marie spun around and saw Kili coming up from behind. "Kili, what on earth are you doing up here?"

The lad looked at her sheepishly. "Here to help carry the weapons. More hands make light work."

"Come on, move." Thorin slipped by from the shadows, startling both his nephew and burglar.

"Keep it down there." Nori hissed. The three of them were silent, and heard the audible ramblings of guards coining from another room.

Bofur joined them shortly after and the five of them began pillaging the armory, hauling several swords and maces into Bofur and Kili's arms. Kili was looking much worse and seemed to struggle with the weight in his arms. Marie too struggled with a large war axe that stood as tall as she, but it was taken from her by Thorin who handed it to Kili. Marie turned her head to hide her frown. She was still upset with him, but he had a point to his harshness so she went along ... for now.

"Are you alright?" She heard Thorin say to Kili quietly.

"I can manage." Was all he replied with before moving on to collect more weapons.

"So you do care." Marie hadn't realized she had whispered that out loud. This seemed to be happening more frequently.

Thorin had been the only one who had heard as, as Nori and Bofur were too busy comparing potential maces.

"Is something upsetting you Miss Baggins?"

"Actually yes, this burglary is unsettling to me."

"You've had no qualms with your previous endeavors."

Marie rubbed her nose with the back of her hand, "I simply ..."

A loud crash made all the thieves stop and stare at where Kili should have been standing. He had lost his footing at the top of a staircase and tumbled down, the weapons scattering in a cacophony of sound.

"Kili!" Marie screamed before clapping her hand over her mouth.

They all froze. No one dared breathe until they all heard the sounded they dreaded. The alarm being raised.

It was all in a matter of seconds, a door bursting open and footsteps thundering towards them from
all around and the voices of dwarf and men alike letting loss mild battle cries at the two parties collided. For once Marie had the sense to use her weapon and drew it out as the guards neared them, holding Sting up as best she could remember. But even with her sword out she remained still as cold iron was pointed at her.

Her opponent, a captain of sort by the red cloak draped over his shoulder, eyed her with a perplexed stare that bounce between her and Thorin, whom she had placed herself in front of when their cover was blown.

Marie raised Sting a little higher.

"Stand down." Thorin ordered.

Nori and Bofur dropped their stolen goods and lifted their hands, but Marie did not. It was unlike the dwarves to not try and escape and she was about to question why he would give up so easily from a fight, until she saw his reason. At the corner of the stair Kili had been pinned down with a brutish arm and a knife pressed to his neck. Dread swell in Marie's belly.

Thorin's hand came round and pushed down on her forearm. "Marie, put it down."

She complied and sheathed the blade in defeat.

"Round them up." The captain barked to the guards, "We'll bring them to the Master."

~*~

The ruckus made by the guards dragging the company through the town stirred the people from their homes, hoping to catch some the excitement of it all. The guards seemed more than happy to make a spectacle of it, probably the most they've had to do in awhile.

The dwarves and Marie however did not enjoy playing along with the show as the guard shoved them along with unnecessary force. Marie in particular was growing impatient with the guard pushing her, for he kept grabbing her injured shoulder. Every time he did she wanted to scream and hit him back just to take the edge of the pain, but luckily she was well practiced in keeping face and marched along beside Balin.

"What on earth happened in there Marie?" The old dwarf asked, "Sounded like a bull had been let loose back there."

"Not quite." Marie glanced ahead at Kili limping. Balin caught on quickly.

"The lad." Balin shook his head, "Thorin should have known better that to let him come with you."

"He should have. But I don't think he was aware of the circumstances."

"Would think you'd be defending his honor lass, after that little spat earlier."

"I'm defending no one Balin. I'm just say how it ... Ouch!" Marie lost her control for a moment when the guard's fingers dug into the hollow of her neck. Instead of simply pushing, he kept a firm grip and pulled her away from Balin and further up the line.

"Do you mind, I can walk." She seethed at him, but he wasn't listening. 'His helmet is probably
muffling his hearing.' The pain in her shoulder and neck was unbearable now and her eyes began to sting with impending tears.

As they stopped before the Town House the guard finally threw Marie back into line. She collided with Thorin arm with a strangled groan.

"Marie." The dwarf picked steadied her as she hunched over clutching her shoulder. His arm came around her shoulders and she was very subtly pulled into Thorin's side. She did not want to be so close to him at that moment, but in lieu of some comfort and warmth she did not resist it fully.

The captain doffed his feathered helmet as the guards encircled the prisoners from the huge crowd that now gathered around them. The black docks of Lake Town were now glowing with torch light and Marie could at last see the flakes of snow falling from the sky. Thorin's protective arm tightened as the doors of the Town House pulled open and a large portly man stalked out, tugging an old fur coat on with great difficulty. "What is the meaning of this!?

Marie curled herself into Thorin's side.

"Caught them stealing weapons Sire." The captain told the man

"Ah, enemies of the state eh?"

Marie felt an instant distrust towards this so called Master, and not for his ridiculous come over that did not cover his balding head or his sluggish voice. It was his beady eyes set behind the folds of fat that made his face.

Another man, dressed in oil black snuck out from behind the Master, taking the place of honor at his side. "Aye Sire. Grand theft and illegal entry to the town. Criminals the lot of them."

That voice, Marie had heard it before. When they first arrived in the barrels, someone had brought Bard's cargo into question and they had almost been discovered. Bard had called him Alfred.

"A desperate bunch of mercenaries if ever there was Sire."

"Hold your tongue!"

'Oh dear. Dwalin's angry.' Marie thought. But the dwarf did not start howling and cursing as she assumed is no common criminal. "This ..." He pointed to Thorin, as the others parted to reveal their leader. Marie did the smart thing and took a step away from Thorin, but not before his hand fell to her wrist and gave it a light squeeze as he stepped forward.

"This is Thorin. Son of Thrain, Son of Thoror!" His raised his voice with pride and a titter erupted from the crowd. The Master's smug turned pale and those beady eyes darted about the crowd, watching their reactions and not the king standing before him.

"We are the dwarves of Erebor, and we have come to reclaim our homeland." Thorin announced boldly. Another round of whispers came from the crowd. Once again Thorin's name proved to be more well known than Marie had even imagined.

"I remember this town in the great days of old. Fleets of bouts lay at harbor, filled with silks and fine gems. This was no forsaken town on a lake, this was the center of all trade in the North." His words stirred the people on, many nodding and agreeing with him. Marie understood full well the power he commanded, and watched him seemingly stand almost ten feet taller before the crowd. "I would see those days return. I would relight the great forges of the dwarves and send wealth and riches flowing once more from the halls of Erebor!"
A gleeful cheer broke out from some of the younger men. But not all shared in such promising ideals.

"Death! That is what you will bring upon us!"

Marie turned and to her despair spotted Bard pushing his way through the crowd. He passed Marie and Balin and squared off with Thorin before the steps of the Town Hall.

"Dragon fire and ruin! If you awake that beast, you will destroy us all."

"You can listen to this naysayer, but I promise you this. If we succeed ... all will share in the wealth of Erebor. You will have enough gold to rebuild Esgaroth ten times over!" Like flies to honey, the people were drawn further in by Thorin's tales of gold, and he knew it.

"Does he mean all of it?" Marie leaned in to Balin, her arms clutching her sides tightly. Balin had been nodding along with Thorin's speech, "A king's word is his bond lass." He told her.

'Is it now."

"All of you! Listen to me! You must listen!" Bard silenced the cheering crowd. "Have you forgotten what happened to Dale? Have you forgotten those who died in the firestorm?" The cold air became tenser with the stand off, even the snowfall grew heavier. In Marie's eyes more was unfolding than just a battle of will. Bard's careful nature had given way to an anger that did not completely belong to him, as though the feelings of many channeled through one soul. "And for what purpose? The blind ambition of a Mountain King, so riveted by greed he cannot see beyond his own desire!"

Bard was not alone in his fight. Several older members of the town viced their remembrance of the destruction. The dwarves looked ready to pummel him to the ground.

"Now, Now!" The Master had kept his tongue to himself since Thorin's revelation, but no doubt the promise of gold sent it wagging. "We must not, anyone of us be too quick to lay blame." He smoothed over the doubters with a flustered tone and jabbed a fat finger at Bard. "Let us not forget, that it was Girion, Lord of Dale, your ancestor, who failed to kill the beast! Mmm?"

Marie ignored the hypocrisy of the Master's statement in light of this news. Bard was the descendant of kings, just as Thorin was. No wonder she could sense a higher cause in him.

"It's true Sire. We all know the story." Alfred said, directing his words to the people, "Arrow after arrow he shot, each one missing its mark." A sly grin worked its way across the man's face when he noticed the people's opinion changing back in their favor.

The hobbit shook her head, "This is getting us nowhere."

"That's politics lass." Balin shrugged.

Marie wasn't listening properly, only watching Bard step closer to Thorin. They each muttered something to the other before both turning to the Master.

"I speak to the Master of the Men of the Lake. Will you share in the great wealth of our people?" Thorin said. "What say you?"

The Master took in one last look around at the crowd, taking in the anticipation of the people. What would he do? Marie knew he had already made his choice.
"I say onto you ... Welcome!" He threw open his arms and the people broke out in thunderous applause. "Welcome and thrice welcome, King Under the Mountain!"

As glad as she should have been for a welcome, Marie felt this to be a hollow victory on their part. But she did admit that Thorin, standing high up the stairs of the Town House, looked every inch the conquering hero. And Bard turned his back, the defeated pariah. Marie alone bared the guilt of casting his help aside in favor for the Master.

"Bard," She tried to catch the bargeman as he walked back passed, mostly likely to return to his family. "I am sorry. Really I am ... that things turned out like this."

He looked down at her, his expression softening to let one loop sided smile through. But it was brief moment and then he was gone, swallowed up by the joyous crowd.

"He'll be alright Marie." Balin patted her good shoulder. "Come along, we're being summoned." It was true, the company had gathered closer together at the foot of the stairs, Thorin still stood on them looking up at the Master.

"It is my personal honor and sworn duty as Master to open my home to you and your company My Lord Thorin." The Master declared and Alfred hurried into the house, "You must be in need of food and drink, of which we have plenty to share."

"We would be honored." Thorin answered flatly.

"About time we were shown some respect." Marie heard Gloin grumble.

"Come come." The Master turned on his heels and entered him home, the dwarves following eagerly. Thorin hung back and made sure each of his men went in before him, but it did mean for a particularly awkward exchange between him and Marie. They both just stared at each other void of a definitive emotion. It become too much and Marie hurried along, composing herself once more.

~*~

"Thank you this." Marie said with as much niceties as she could muster as the manservant Alfred led her to the third floor of the Town House.

"A pleasure ma'am." He did not look back at her when he spoke. "Are you quite sure you do not wish to remain at dinner?"

"Quite sure." Maire needed to escape the minor party going on down on the first floor. The Master had ordered meat and fish brought up and cooked for the thirteen dwarves and for the Master himself. Drink was also made available and none of the dwarves had had a decent drop since ... come to think of it not since they first tumbled through her door.

'How long has it been since I thought of home?'

Anyway, Marie was in no mood for merriment but for sleep. She craved some rest and solitude for a time before returning her focus to the quest. When she had inquired the manservant on where she could rest, he had run off to his employer's side to repeat the request. The Master took one look in her direction and had informed Alfred of a guest room that was vacant. She was glad to be out of the room and away from the portly man. She had caught him staring at her, with leering glint in his
eye and a chuckle as he conversed with Thorin.

"This way ma'am." Alfred turned left at top of the stairs and led her down a narrow corridor with nothing but portraits of the Master. Or at least his family. The candelabra Alfred was holding flicked as a draft came down from a cracked window.

At the end of the corridor Alfred stopped and removed a set of keys. He unlocked a door and entered, with Maire not too far behind. The room was large, spacious enough for the whole company even with the large bed against the far wall. Other than that there was an ancient looking vanity tucked into the corner and a reading chair next to the window. The air was thick with dust and there was a smell of damp coming from somewhere.

"Sorry for the dust." Alfred said lazily and lit a single candle on the wall, "We haven't treated guests of such importance for a long time." His face made a horrible expression that started Marie. Maybe it was the dim lighting.

"It is more than adequate. We have had much more impractical on our travels."

"I'm sure."

Maire backed herself against a bookshelf and watched him cross back to the door. "Well, call if there is anything you need. I'm sure you'll have company soon enough."

"Ugh ... yes. I suppose."

He gave her a large false smile and closed the door with a loud creek.

'What was that about?'

At last she had some privacy and with no qualms she let loss an undignified sigh. She undid the belt and slid it and Sting off, dropping the sword at the foot of the bed. A cloud of dust rose and clung to her face.

'Right then.' Marie spent a good long while patting down the blankets, coughing and choking as she did. Just how long had it been since anyone thought to clean? Eventually the strain in her left side left her unable to finish dusting the bed and she had to stop.

'Wonder how bad this is? Some more light would be nice.'

After rummaging around all the drawers, her luck brought forth four small candles tucked behind a stack of sheets. Soon a light golden glow danced off the wall, making the room less ominous. The mirror fixed to the vanity caught Marie's attention and she brought one of the candles over to it. It wasn't dusty, but a build up of some sorts obscured the surface. She rubbed the cuff of her sleeve over the mirror, slowly but surely removing the build up of grim to a point where she could just make out her reflection. 'Better than nothing.'

She removed the blue coat and undid the top two buttons of her shirt. The damage to her neck was easily seen now. The bruising had gone yellow in most places but patches of dark purple and green formed on both sides of her neck and continued down her shoulder. Marie skimmed a finger over a spot on the jugular. She was lucky her hair covered most of the injuries, otherwise the dwarves would be in fits.

The door clicked and Marie swiveled round to see it open.

It was Alfred again, holding the door open for someone. He didn't even see Marie or announce
himself. "Here we are My Lord. You little bed warmer is waiting."

Marie blinked rapidly. 'What? Did he just...? What?' She took a breath to loudly inform the manservant that he had the wrong room, but lost the thought to exhale when she saw to whom he was speaking to.

Thorin stepped into the room with a blank expression.

"Enjoy." Alfred bowed and shut the door.

'What the bloody hell!?'

Thorin just stood there at the now closed door, staring at Marie. She did not let the silence hanging over them continue. "Did he just call me a bed warmer?" She pointed at the door, hand shaking from confusion and a little anger. Thorin dropped his gaze and moved slowly to the window. "Aye, you heard right."

"Where on earth did he get that idea?"

"The Master, more than likely." Thorin placed a hand on the window ledge and gazed out onto the town. "He was the one who arranged ... this."

"So the Master thinks of me as ..."

"As my woman." Thorin finished for her, rushing his voice to get it out.

Marie was stunned. "Your ... woman?"

"Yes. The Master inquired about you and made the assumption that you were the company's ... well ... shared property. But I told him you were mine and mine alone, just to try and keep you honor intact."

"My honor? Intact?" Marie scoffed.

"Don't worry, I will not do anything."

"That's not the point Thorin."

"It was all I could think at the time, I was ..."

"You could have told him I was a burglar."

Thorin turned to her."He wouldn't have believed it. Anyway we have to play to his ..."

"His what? Needs? Expectation? Oh yes, perfectly fine then. You just play along with his whims and let him, and probably the whole of Lake Town believe that I'm a common whore."

She wounded him with her words and whatever defense he had was now useless. "I understand you feel angry."

"I was angry, now I'm frustrated." Marie crossed her arms in front of her chest. "This day just keeps getting better and better."

"Yes, about you anger." Thorin had regained some of his fire, "Just what did I do to warrant you enmity today."
Marie raised an eyebrow. "Do you want the short list or the long?"

"Just one reason will suffice." Thorin said.

"Bard."

His lips became a thin line at the mention of the man. "What of him?"

"What of it?" Marie uncrossed her arms and placed her hands in her hips. At that point she remembered her shirt was still partially open but she had an argument to get across, "You asked for help from a man already struggling to make ends meet but still agrees to it. Yet you threw his charity back at him and leave him high and dry before the town."

"He was against us the minute he knew who I was. What's done is done now, the Master will ensure we get what we need."

"For a price." Marie grumbled and leaned against the vanity.

"For a price." Thorin repeated, "I seemed to recall your savior gladly accepting our money before helping us." He turned his back and removed his own overcoat, which he tossed onto the arm of the moth eaten chair.

Marie could be bothered fighting anymore and buried her face in her hands. She was tired, in pain, cold and just wanted a good night sleep. Who had she offended to earn such poor karma?

Her hands may have obscured her eyes, but she could still hear Thorin moving in about the room. 'Let him walk out his anger. That will work.'

His footsteps grew closer until Marie thought she felt them stop right in front of her. She dropped her hands and found her fears to be right. She was barely two feet from her, with a hand outstretched and aimed at her neck. She was trapped between him and the vanity with no way out.

"What are you doing?" She asked incredulously.

"You're injury." He said, as if it was the most naturally thing in the world. "Is it bad?"

Her hand automatically shot up and clutched her shirt together. "Should Oin be the judge if that?"

"Well Oin," He took another step, now standing over her with only a foot between them. "Isn't here right now." Marie wanted to protest and yell, yet she didn't. She was sure she was making the most unattractive faces as she silently gave in. She dropped her hand and turned her face away, so she could not look at him. If she did her face may go even redder than it already was.

Fingertips brush along her cheekbone, were the minor scratches had closed over. They were cold against her face, but light, delicate. They traced down her jaw and down her neck, cooling the bruises. Marie winced every so slight when too much pressure was applied. Thorin's fingers paused at the hollow of her neck, resting on her pulse. He hooked them under the fabric of the shirt and pushed it back, his thumb trailing along the now exposed skin of her shoulder. Marie shuddered at how soothing it felt.

"When did this happen?" Marie almost didn't hear the question. His voice seemed so far away.

"The um ... orcs. They ... When they pulled me out of the river." She croaked. "Lucky my neck did snap."
His hand pressed too hard into her collar bone and she made a noise in the back of her throat. Thorin muttered an apology and moved his hand back to her neck. A tugging at a lock of her hair alerted Marie to him wrapping her hair around his fingers. She couldn't handle it anymore and pushed his hand away.

"It will be fine in a few days, provided I don't get knocked about again." She mumbled as she buttoned up her shirt, keeping her eyes down. Thorin hooked a finger under Marie's chin and lifted her head to look up at him.

The light from the candle lit up half his face, and Marie could swear there was almost something predatory in his stare. Something so dangerous it was alluring. He was too close, too close. His hooked nose brushed against her's lightly and warmth pooled in her stomach sending all sensible thoughts from her head. No man had even looked at her like this before, and no man had ever made her feel so many things all at once.

'Oh good God, I'm not in ...'

Just as quickly as he forced her to look at him, he removed his hand turned away. "Get some rest." He went back to the window and resumed his place there.

Marie couldn't move. Her whole body had frozen up yet her heart was pounding so hard it hurt her ears. She gathered her thoughts or what remained of them and quickly made for the bed, making sure she turned her back of the dwarf. She didn't want to be tempted to stare at him.

'No I am not,' Marie curled into the musty pillow and shut her eyes, 'Mariellena Baggins you are not in love with Thorin Oakenshield.'

The trouble being ... she was.
Lake Town was much different the next day. There was life in its streets and a purpose to the people. A far cry from the first mundane impression Marie had gotten sneaking around the back alleys. There was an excitement in the morning air and Marie stood on the porch of the Town House watching it all. It was all she could do for the time being, all the dwarves had since gone off as she had been informed by Alfred when she finally emerged that morning, to view their choices of weapons in the armory. Now that they were the Master's guests, they were allowed to use the front door.

She could have easily kept to the room and found something to pass the time, a book perhaps or the chance to practice with Sting, but she chose to go out and take in Lake Town. Groups of gossiping spinsters huddled together and looked on eagerly at the house. No doubt they were waiting for a glimpse of the dwarves and the King Under the Mountain.

Some of the fisherman stopped by too, Marie even spotted a group of children hiding behind a house.

She should have been happy for these people, at last they had something, some hope for a better life should Thorin keep to his word, but Marie was just left feeling deflated. She rested her chin on the hands as she leaned against the banister.

She had had a horrible dream that night.

A vicious nightmare that had trapped her in shadow, with only a ring of fire her companion that whispered dark words to her. But even that left her behind, alone. That was how she had awoken that morning, alone in the room, the other side of the bed untouched.

She was pleased that Thorin had some decency, but concern that he taken to the floor to rest. He was a king after all and she the intruder of his bed. Surely there was enough trust between them to sleep on the same bed, after so many nights of camping together. Marie closed her eyes and pushed all thoughts of that away.

"Ah, ma'am."

The hobbit jumped. Coming out of the house was the Alfred, dressed in the same black garments from the night before. Marie straightened her back and let it fall to her side, where her sword was.

"I hope breakfast was to your approval." He towered over her, smelling of spice and body odour.

"Yes, lovely." Was all Marie could say without gagging.

"The Master will be pleased to hear that." There was that false toothy grin again. "You weren't at the table when this was mentioned so I should tell you now. The Master is holding a celebration this evening in honor of Lord Thorin. Just a little something before his send off tomorrow morning."

"Marvelous."

"The Master wished for me to ask ... you know I didn't quite catch your name. Margret? Maggie?"
"Marie."

"Charmed Lady Marie."

Marie's fingers scratched at the wood. She didn't know just what to say to the man.

"As I was saying, would you like a new dress brought in for you? I don't know what we would have in your size but I'm sure something could be whipped up ..."

"As kind as the thought is, I must decline."

Alfred gave a little nod. "As you wish. Thought you would like something nice to wear for your king. Or does he have an extrinsic taste? Not that I condemn whatever he enjoys, we all have a guilty pleasures."

'Doesn't this man have any tack about him?' Marie wouldn't have given answer even if she knew what Thorin liked.

She was saved from any more unsavory questions by a slight man with a patch over his right eye that came running up the steps. Alfred saw him and quickly met him at the top, listening to the man whisper something in his ear and nodding along.

Bard had mentioned that the Master had eyes and ears all over the town. Maybe this Alfred was responsible for the flow of information that actually reached his ears. He waved the one eyed man away and returned to Marie. "Ma'am you will have to pardon me but my associate has informed me of a matter that I need to see to immediately."

'Please do not let me keep you from your work.' Marie indicated to the retreating man. 'Yes please leave me be.'

Alfred bowed again and left, walking with hunched shoulders as he got further from her. Marie could still smell his spicy scent lingering. It could have been worse, the Master could have come out to ask her himself. The thought made her shiver and she fixed the collar of her coat to shield her neck.

'A walk ... may be a good idea.'

She decided that instead of risking meeting the Master alone, she would explore the town as best she could. She had Sting so she had some protection.

The town itself was humble if not in dire need of repair work. The woodwork was stain with water damage and time, and lines of ropes and nets hung between the balconies like cobwebs. The most foliage she could spot grew in small window boxes filled with flowers and herbs and one vegetable patch set next to a pig pen. The folk did not bother her, but she did get a few lingering stares as she passed them on the docks. One older gentleman was a little too vocal about it and questioned his friend about her lack of facial hair very loudly.

Marie had stopped to view some of the boats when she had the most peculiar feeling of being watched. Her suspicions were correct when a small ball bounced off her leg. When she looked around to see just who kicked it she spotted a small face staring at her. It was a little girl with skin the color of honey and large dark eyes, hiding against a wooden beam. Marie's lip quirked and the child came further out of hiding.

"Is this yours?" She picked up the ball and held it out. The child nodded. "Here. I won't bite."
The child shuffled out and took back the ball. She was the same height as Marie.

"What's your name?" Marie asked but the girl said nothing and stuck a finger in her moth to chew. "I'm Marie."

"There you are Gertrude." A boy came running around the corner with a set of red head twin girls on his heels. "Give us back the ... oh." The trio stopped and stared at Marie.

"Her name is Gertrude then?" Marie asked the boy. He resembled the girl a great deal, only his skin was fairer.

"Ugh yes." He came up behind the girl and pulled her close, "She doesn't talk that much. I'm Daven."

"Hello Daven. I'm Marie."

Daven took the ball off his sister, "You're with them dwarves right? Da told us about them."

Marie nodded. The twin girls came forward with the taller of the two taking the lead. "Are you a dwarf lady? Mama said there were no such things as lady dwarves."

"She ain't no dwarf. She hasn't got a beard." Daven pointed out.

"Are you going to slay the dragon?" The shorter twin asked

"Shut up Hollie."

"But she has a sword. She must be a dragon slayer."

"Don't be stupid."

"But it's true."

"Not quite." Marie tried to explain. "I am no dragon slayer. I am just a ... traveling complain to the dwarves."

Daven squeezed Gertrude's shoulder, "Is it true that the King Under the Mountain is among you?"

"Indeed he is."

"What's he like?"

There was something kindred about these children and their innocent curiosity that made Marie long to forget her worried heart and mind, if only for a short while.

"Would you like to hear a story?"

Their answer came with swift nods of the head.

~*~

"So there I was. Surround by three monstrous troll."

The children leaned in closer as Marie dropped her voice for dramatic effect. Since starting her tale
more and more had joined the small circle they had created. They all stared wide eyed up at the hobbit sitting on a basket as she told her tale while the red head twins braided her hair around her head, crooning how long and pretty it was.

Marie felt like Old Took surround by all the grandchildren and cousins during his grand parties. "The dwarves bravely fought off the trolls, hacking slicing at their tough hides. But alas we were still captured and stuffed into bags. But," Marie held up a finger as she paused, watching the look of anticipation. "We were saved by the troll's peculiar tastes for flesh."

Gertrude and the other young girls all gave a collective "Ew!"

"What do you mean Miss Marie?" Daven asked.

"Well instead of just eating us, they spent all night arguing amongst themselves about how they were going to cook us."

The children giggled at the thought of trolls arguing over such thing, even Marie thought, looking back on it now, how silly it really was.

"Yes, they couldn't agree on anything, whether to turn us on a spit or sit on us one by one and squash us to jelly. Just then, the sun's first light slowly crept over the top of the trees and we beheld upon a boulder the Grey Wizard, holding aloft this staff. With one mighty swing he stabbed it into the rock ... POOF!"

They gasped loudly.

"The rock split in two and the sunlight came pouring in, turning the trolls to stone in mere seconds. For there is one thing you should always know, is that a wizard is never late for anything."

Two little boys cheered as the rest clapped. Marie smiled broadly at all the happy faces.

"How did you get out of the bags Miss Marie?" One of the twins asked as she tied the last braid in. Her sister gave her a small bunch of yellow flowers to put in the braided crown they had given her.

"Oh there was a lot of wriggling and jumping."

"And a lot of hopping on your part."

The children and Marie looked up at the newest member of their party, Kili. He still looked a little too pale for Marie's taste but he was standing upright with a smile, which was something at least. Daven and his friend Myca began whispering excitedly at the sight of one of the dwarves.

"You left out the best part Marie. How you confused the trolls by telling them we had parasites." Kili said.

"And then you," Marie pointed at him, "Loudly claimed you had the biggest of them all."

The children laughed heartily at him while Marie had a triumphant grin on her face. He nodded his head and let it all roll off his back, "Yes, I did." His face slowly turned quite serious. "I'm sorry to interrupt the story but ... Thorin needs to speak with you Marie."

The hobbit's heartbeat doubled. "Did he say what for?"

"Um, no just that he needed to speak with you."

Something was off with how Kili spoke.
"Very well." Marie hopped off the basket, "I'm sorry young ones but I will have to finish the story another time."

The children groaned and slowly dispersed. Daven took Gertrude's hand, "Promise you'll finish it."

"One day my lad."

Gertrude mumbled a thank you with a finger in her mouth. The twin girls patted Marie's new crown braid and accepted her thanks before heading off with the others.

"So, where is he?" Marie asked Kili. The young dwarf bit his lip, "Ugh... this way." He pointed down one of the docks and started moving before Marie could ask anything else.

The dock was empty save for an old man sitting by in some corner mending baskets. There was a slight limp in Kili's walk and Marie wondered if he should be up and about like this.

"Kili ..."

"Your hair looks nice like that."

"Kili."

"Not to say it wasn't nice before, it was pretty .. I mean free ... I mean"

"Kili." Marie said firmly, causing the dwarf to stop in his tracks, "Thorin didn't ask to speak to me did he?"

Kili shuffled awkwardly, "No." He admitted, "I wanted to ... ask you something."

Marie walked a little closer to him, "What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong. It's ..." He wet his lips and kept looking elsewhere but her face. "It's an odd thing to ask but ... just how do you ... well what I want is ... just how do you see me?"

"How do I see you?"

"More specifically feel ... about me I mean."

Marie's mouth hung open a little. 'Oh boy,' She should have seen this coming. She was sometimes absentminded about things but she wasn't completely oblivious. She had an inkling, but hadn't quite anticipated this, "You wish to know about my feelings for you." Marie clarified. Kili's face went pink. "I must warn you that I can give nothing but the truth."

"Any answer would do. I just ... would like to know."

"Kili." She started gently, "I do care about you," His eyes light up in a brief second of hope, "but what you are asking of me is something that I can not give you."

He did not seem hurt by her answer, if anything his shoulders drop was relief at knowing it. But that still did not stop the flash of disappointment in his eyes.

"So then, you don't ... love me."

Marie placed a hand on his shoulder and gave it a light squeeze."There is a difference between loving someone and being in love. I do love you dearly as my friend, but I am afraid my affections do not go beyond that."
"How do you know when you're in love?" Kili asked in a small voice. Marie found herself stumped.

"Good question," Her hand fell back to her side, "It affects every one of us differently."
"But for you Marie, what does feel like?"

Marie fell silent and looked out at the half frozen water.

"Marie?"

She took a deep cold breath and said, "Once, long ago I was in love. A childish, innocent love it was. And when I lost it I felt ... empty. But, growing old I realize there are other things that come with the warm joyous emotions. Confusion, doubt, fear, curiosity. I guess love is not a simple thing. "Marie couldn't help but smile a bittersweet smile, "Sometimes we fall against our wills."

"So, expect anything when it comes to love." Kili said.

"Exactly." Marie nodded. "You will find love one day Kili, it will happen. Besides I'm a little too old for you don't you think?"

Kili scrunched up his face, "I'm older than you."

They both had a little chuckle at the fact. "Still," Marie patted his face, "I am old by my standards, go find some young strapping dwarf lass with beads in her beard and dimples on her cheeks."

Kili smiled, but his eyes danced about his feet nervously. "I hope you will not think less of me Marie." He ducked his head and pressed a light kiss on her cheek.

"Kili."

All of a sudden it got even colder.

Marie looked around and saw Thorin standing across the way watching the pair of them, though she was certain it was more glaring than anything.

It would have saved a lot of pain for all of them if she snuck off there and then to avoid Thorin, but Marie thought about it again and how immature of her it would be. No she would face the problem head on, and maybe resolve it. Kili passed Thorin, stopping to whisper something quickly but was silenced by his uncle's piercing eyes. Kili retreated and Thorin turned that gaze onto Marie.

"I would say good morning, but I'm a few hours too late I think." She started off with a lighter attitude, hoping to break the tension.

"Indeed." His tone seemed passive enough, but there was fire brewing in his eyes. Just what was he angry at now? Marie arms folded across her chest once more, an act of self defense she had hoped not to do around her companions anymore. He came closer to her until they stood toe to toe. "You shouldn't be wandering around alone."

"I'm not completely defenseless," She said, referring to Sting, "And as you know I'm quite talented as vanishing into thin air."

"You know what I mean." He bent his head low. Marie wanted to pull away from the tingling his warm breath left against the shell of her ear, but didn't. "That man with the basket across the water has been watching you for the past few minutes." Marie's eyes flickered across to the man in question. She had not even noticed he was there. "We may be the Master's guests, but his eyes are
still on us."

"So you don't trust him either." Marie muttered, a little more vicious than intended.

Thorin pulled himself upright, "Walk with me."

Marie was about to question why she should until she remembered they had a charade to play out.

So they walked, side by side in silence. At first Marie thought he was taking her back to the Town House where they would be gawked at even further, but no. He took them out towards the edge of the town where there were less curious Lake men. There air between them was still soured from last night's debacle though not a potent as Marie had dreaded it would be. She spoke first.

"What are our next movements?"

Thorin stopped them over the wooden arch bridge they were crossing. "We leave at first light. Durin's Day falls tomorrow and we still need to find the hidden door."

"I see." Marie raised her eyebrows. "I hear that the Master is throwing you a party."

Thorin lent his hands against the wooden rail of the bridge and looked out at nothing in particular. He didn't respond to her.

"Did the others do well in their search of weapons?"

Marie got a grunt out the dwarf.

'Well this is going swimmingly.' Marie thought bitterly. If he wanted her to walk with him, he could at least try to engage her in a conversation. She rested her back on the rail and waited patiently, placing a good amount of room between them. 'Keep your head Marie. No use in harping on about it again. Gives you terrible headaches.'

Out of the corner of her eye she saw Thorin's hand delve into the fold of his coat. "I almost forgot."

"Mmm?"

Thorin held out his hand to her.

"What ..." Marie looked at what was in his open hand and was surprised. It was her father's button. "How did you ...?"

"Found it on the river bank." Thorin said.

Marie hand flew to her pocket. "I didn't even know I had lost it."

"Thought it best to return it, seeing as how it is both your father's and your good luck charm."

Marie forgot she was suppose to be angry with him and was genuinely touched that he would remember the sentimental value of something so small. She reached out to take it back but stopped, her hand hovered over his.

It was a silly idea, but still ...

She closed his fingers around the button. "Perhaps you could profit from some luck."

Thorin appeared confused by her decision. "You would really give me something of such value to
"Well if I am to play the part of your lover, wouldn't it appear normal for me to give you a token or sorts?"

She knew she hit a nerve when she felt his fist became firm as stone beneath her fingers. A low blow on her part. Thorin frowned and stuffed the button back into his coat. "Perhaps you wouldn't mind if Kili was your partner in this."

"It doesn't matter to me who, I would still be just as upset that I wasn't even asked to lie about ... this." Marie waved a finger back and forth between them.

"From what I see, you don't mind his affections."

Marie just stared at him in disbelief. The way he spoke denoted something of being scorned. But by what ... or whom? Marie put two and two together.

"I think you made up your own conclusion about what you've seen without knowing all the facts." Marie kept her voice in check, lest she would provoke him any more than she had.

Thorin raised his head to the sky and let out a long winded sigh, his breath becoming fog as it hit the cold air. "Then perhaps ... my dear Marie," His voice, low and rich with tone, made Marie's knees weak and threaten to buckle. "You could tell me what I saw." He only made it worse by looking at her with those intense eyes of his.

'Come on Marie. Be reasonable about this and breathe.'

"What you saw," Marie said slowly as she got her breath back, "Was your nephew asking me about a delicate issue he felt needed to be addressed. I gave him my answer and he handled it well." If her eyes, Thorin appeared relieved. "It is good to talk through things. Some would say it's healthy." Marie went on to say.

The lines etched around his eyes grew taunt, indicating that he understood her meaning. He slid his hand across the rail until his forearms bore his weight. "You cause to disagree with my decisions and actions and I am sorry if my words last night seemed harsh to you."

Marie nose twitched habitually, "I spoke harshly as well Thorin and nor do I wish to let my anger get the better of me. To me it's just ... well." Marie puffed out her lips and sighed. "Everything just seems so ... difficult here in the East." She said, shaking her head.

"It may be hard for you accept, but understand that this path is a lesser of two evils."

"Evils? Who would ... oh." Marie caught on to what he meant. "The Elven King."

The muscles in Thorin's arm tensed, "The elves would do anything in the power to prevent my people from regaining our glory." He seethed.

Marie edged herself a little closer and propped her hands on the rail next to his. "You have more in common than you'd care to think."

"Who."

"Elves and Dwarves." Thorin looked at her like she had slapped him. "Same with the mortal men. You all have shared qualities."
Thorin rolled his eyes. "I fail to see your meaning."

"We'll for one thing you all have a lot of pride. You all wish better for your people. None of you want to admit fault."

"And what do you mean by that?"

Marie took a moment just to look at him crestfallen.

'How is it he can not see?'

"From what I have seen as an outsider, no one seems willing bare any of the fault of the loss of the mountain."

He said nothing to the hobbit's logic, twisting the ring on his left hand around his finger.

'Is he fidgeting?'

"It does not mean any one of you are without good shared qualities."

Still he said nothing. Marie sighed and tried to think of a better way of putting it. She plucked a small blossom from her braid and held it between her fingers. "This flower. What do you call it?"

Thorin spared it a glance, "Sun Pebble. It comes from the Khuzdul name Urzudul Abanul. It's only a wild flower that grows in small patches, nothing more."

Marie twirled the yellow bud. "In the Shire we call it Gardener's Gold." She remembered it fondly, her father explaining it when she was but a babe. "We use it to determine if the soil is fertile. No hobbit worth their salt would be without a patch of this in their garden. It's also used in a bride's bouquet to symbolize a good marriage and the promise of healthy children."

Thorin listened to what she had to say, but still did not see to what end it lead to, "So it is called a different name, what of it?" Thorin's head tilted to the side as he stared down at her over his shoulder.

Marie held the flower up closer to him."Is in not grown from the same earth, watered and nurtured by the same rain and sun as your Sun Pebble?"Marie asked. He nodded his head.

"Then it is the same flower, regardless of name and culture."

Thorin shifted himself to stand front on to her. He took the yellow blossom from her and set in on his palm. It looked so much smaller resting in his hand. "You have quite the affinity for plants Miss Baggins." He said, flexing his fingers so that he held the flower between his thumb and index.

"We Hobbits are of the earth. We care and respect for in and in return we have all that we need." The dwarf's eyes looked up from the flower to gaze into hers. They were soft, gentle, not burning with the fire Marie had seen earlier. He tucked the flower back into her hair with all the care in the world.

"Are we now to call a truce?" He asked, his fingers skimming the line of her jaw. Marie secretly delighted in the feeling.

"A truce ... for now. But do not think I am finished being cross with you." She said with a crooked grin.
A chuckle emanated from his chest and Marie could feel the vibrations of it. "I have heard the same threat time and time again from my sister and no longer cower before it." Thorin pushed her loose hair over her shoulder.

"Tell me about her? Your sister."

Then Thorin smiled. It wasn't forced, patronizing or showing amusement at her request. It was pure and genuine. Marie had only seen him smile like that once before and she prayed that she would perhaps she would see it more often.

"As my Lady commands." He teased, playing his part.

For something that was supposed to be a facade, it felt awfully real. 'It's not Marie. It's all for show.' She had to remind herself that fact.

But surely an old hobbit could indulge herself?

Chapter End Notes

Yeah so as stated in the tag, there is some minor Kili and Marie for a few chapters but all really one sided on Kili's part. He is still friends with Tauriel here just not in the romantic sense, please don't smite me Tauriel/Kili shippers.
Wine Bred Dreams

Chapter Notes

Okay so this chapter underwent a lot more editing so it’s a little different to the original at a certain point. I wanted to make it a little more ... smutty. Nothing too outrageous but just a bit more spice.

Warning: there may be hints of dubcon here as there is alcohol involved and Marie is a bit of a light weight.

The celebration of the dwarves was a grand but exclusive event within the Town House. Those who were honoured with an invite were those sat on council, tax men, traders, anyone with reason to bow and scrape to the Master. But the dwarves did not care for whom the Master saw fit to dine with them, they at least were content with drink overflowing their glasses and meat on their forks.

A welcome distraction to the potential battle with a dragon the next day. There was no real sitting arrangement, the food had been laid out on the comity tables and the men wandered to from each one.

Marie felt a bit out of place being the only woman present other than the serving girl who came out occasionally with three serving boys. She kept close to Dwalin when Bofur got to tipsy and insisted on finding a flute.

Marie too felt her sobriety failing her slowly. The wine was singing in her veins and making the room even warmer.

'Now I see why the elves were so merry.'

It had been a while since Marie had allowed herself to drink, Proper young ladies would favour tea over ale, but Marie's father would often let her steal quick sips when no one was looking. In his later years they would sit near the fire with some of his best mead, talking for hours.

As the third casket of wine was brought out, the Master stood up from the head of the top table, a glass in his hand to make a toast. "To the King Under the Mountain." He said with as much decorum as one could when they’re drunk. The men and dwarves cheered, raising their own various drinks. Marie just clutched the wine glass tighter. "And to the bright and profitable future of our people." The Master looked directly across the floor at Thorin when he said this. The dwarf was standing in the centre surrounded by traders and raised his tankard in acknowledgment to the Master.

The large man prattled on about some nonsense about his ‘hard work’ to keep Lake Town afloat, but Marie wasn't listening.

Thorin glanced over to her little hiding spot by Dwalin's side and caught her gaze. His eyes held a glint that Marie interpreted as inquiring. She dipped her head to let him know she alright and the ghost of a smile played at the corner of his lip.

After they had called a truce, Thorin spent the whole day by Marie's side, talking, listening, and on
the odd occasion laughing. She had managed two more smiles out of him when they had found common ground on the childhood interest of star gazing. They still disagreed on certain points, but there was no malice to it. More playful banter than harsh judgement. All in all, Marie had wished that afternoon had gone on a little longer.

But she still refuse to admit anything.

She took a long sip of her wine and let the strong brew burn her throat.

"You might want to go easy on that." Dwalin bent down so that she could hear him

"I've only had one."

"I counted two."

Marie frowned up at the burly dwarf. "I can hold my drink just fine thank you."

"It's not your drink that's to fear." Dwalin straightened himself and surveyed the room. "Meaning no disrespect but I doubt someone your size could cause much damage when drunk."

"I will take that as an obscure compliment and move on."

"Wise thinking there."

Marie's upper lip quirked as she raised the glass to her lips again. Dwalin may have been prone to violence, lacked subtly and was scary most of the time, but still Marie liked him.

Her mood turned sour when Alfred came over to her. She tried to take another sip but came to realise she had finished her wine. Alfred had changed his coat for the evening but that spicy smell lingered. "Ma'am, pardon the interruption but the Master wishes to meet you." He said.

"Meet me?"

"Yes ma'am, now just come this way," He reached out to touch her shoulder, but Dwalin stayed his hand with a single glare. Marie quickly placed her empty glass on a table and hurried along after the manservant before Dwalin did anything.

As she was lead towards the top table, she mentally readied herself for whatever the Master would ask her. She regretted leaving Sting back in bedroom.

The man sat in his chair leisurely and was idly fingering an old gold chain around his neck. He reminded her of how she had first seen the Goblin King on his throne. The extra chin, clammy skin, even the layers of fat spilling over the armrest, the resemblance was uncanny. Marie covered her mouth and pretended to sneeze to hide a snort.

Alfred took her around the table and placed her right next to his chair. "Sire. As you requested."

'Requested? Oh for heaven's sake I'm not a ... No Marie remember yourself and play along.'

"Well now," The Master leaned further into the armrest and stared down at her, "So I finally meet Thorin's woman."

Marie took a second and nodded.

"Quite a pretty thing, though not a beauty."

"A pleasure to make your acquaintance sir. My name is Marie Baggins, formally of the Shire." She said in a clear voice that masked her injured ego.
The Master made a noise of pleasant surprise that grated her ears, "Eloquent. Impressive." He brushed a finger over his wispy moustache. "Is that how you keep your lords attention, by charming him with dainty words of flattery?" He chuckled and wiggled about in his seat, pulling at his long robe to get comfortable. "Women have a way with words. Or are they just talented with their mouths in general?" He asked Alfred who sniggered.

Marie blinked back her disgust and calmly said. "I can hold my own with ... my lord when it comes to talking. A decent conversation can be worth just as much as a hefty sum of gold."

"True, true." The Master waved her statement aside with a fat hand. He pressed her for a few simple questions about her origins, how she met Thorin and so on, all of which she answered promptly, or for some lied about. But he caught her with his last question. "Tell me my dear, what do you get out of this?"

"I beg your pardon sir but you may have to be more specific."

"Well I do not see myself the merit of bringing a woman along such a quest, other than for warmth. And not to be disrespectful," Marie pursed her lips, 'Too late for that.' "But you are not from noble birth, are you?"

"... No."

"Right, then to my understanding Thorin Oakenshield could never take for his legal wife. Political business within the dwarven clans or something like that."

'Legal what? Take ... me?'

"So my question my dear is what to you gain from this? It may not be any of my business but it does make one curious."

"I ..." Marie struggled with the words, and it wasn't the drink that caused it. She cleared her throat and started again. "I simply wish for the dwarves of Erebor to reclaim the home they lost. Nothing would make me happier than that."

Alfred gave a patronizing sigh, "Such devotion, brings tears to the eye."

"Indeed. Alfred be a good man and fetch two brandies." The Master ordered.

"Right away Sire."

Marie protested, politely with a smile, but Alfred returned and handed her the glass with honey coloured liquid without listening to her. The Master took a swig of his and said, "Come now my dear. This is one of the finest brews in the East, absolute wonder it is."

There was really no choice for her. Marie held her breath and drank. Just as she had expected, the brandy scorched the inside of her mouth and festered in her belly, leaving behind the after taste of something ... sweet.

'Well that's a first.' She examined it then took a second sip, then a third. The Master was grinning like an idiot as he watched her, "Told you. My personal favourite." And with that he finished his bandy and barked at his manservant for another.

As Marie went to take a forth sip, her mind took a giant back flip and she had felt like her left side was heavier than the right.

'My word, what on ... oh' She felt herself swaying. Perhaps she should have pressed harder on her
declining the brandy. Someone next to the Master said something funny. Or at least Marie thought it was funny since she felt her shoulders shake from laughter. If there was one thing Marie hated when she ever did drink, it was that she became a profound giggler. Marie excused herself, even if the man heard her or not, and walked. Or skipped some would say, between the tall men around her who didn't even know she was there. The burning in her belly spread and filled her limbs and head with joy, if that was at all possible.

She drank more brandy.

"Theeeeeerrrrreeeee'ssss aaaaan!"

'Who? What? Whyuuuhh?' The hobbit looked around to see where the noise was coming from, spinning herself in a full circle.

"Aaaaannn inn, there's an inn, there's a merry old inn beneath an old grey hill!"

Bofur had gotten on a table and gave a repeat performance of what had happened at Rivendell, only a drunk version.

Or was Marie imagining it?

The men clapped along and the dwarves sang along, even Marie found herself tapping her hand on the one holding the brandy. She made her way over to lean of a wooden beam and watched Bofur sing away, even goading and lanky man with a scraggly beard into singing with him. It was so very very funny to Marie. Her eyes drooped and she rested her head on the wood, letting the noise around her flow over her like water.

She could have very well had gone to sleep right there and then. Perhaps she did. When she opened her eyes again, Bofur was off the table and had been replaced by three identically looked men shouting a shanty of sorts.

Marie pinched the bridge of her nose and looked again. Now the middle man had black hair and a lute in hand.

'I must be dreaming now.'

She raised the glass up but a hand appeared out of nowhere and covered it, preventing her from drinking it. She opened her mouth to protest but only a huff of air came out.

"How many of these have you had?"

She knew that voice, but where? Where, where, where? Oh yes.

"Hello Thorin." She grinned. He positioned himself in full view of her, darkening the room. Was he larger than normal or was Marie getting smaller?

"How many?" He yanked the glass from her and sniffed it.

"Just the one." Marie shrugged. "One of the best he said."

Thorin disposed of the remaining brandy. Marie blinked and it was gone. "Who?"

She leaned around the dwarf and pointed to the Master, "His Royal Highness over there."

Thorin glance over see who then back down at her. "He gave you the drink?" He sounded angry.

"Aye." Marie nodded. "Hail to the Prince of Goblins and his bloody rude weasel." Judging by the
reaction Thorin gave her, she had utterly stumped him. She twisted herself around so that the pillar supported all her weight.

"Come." He murmured and pulled her along by the forearm. "I think the best remedy for you is sleep."

"Sleep? I'm already dreaming." Marie snorted, but let him lead her along.

No one questioned them leaving, not even the dwarves. Though none of them saw them slip away into the dark and thankfully quiet hall that lead to the stairs. Marie would have been happy to go on her own, but Thorin refused to let her go.

"I am fine Thorin." Marie blinked with every word. She felt more than fine, she felt absolutely giddy. "I can walk up a few stairs on my own." As she said this, her foot magically slipped and she stumbled.

"It's not the stairs that worry me." Thorin held her arm steady so that she could find her balance again. He practically dragged her up the stairs like a child being sent to bed. The third story landing was blessedly free from any servants, with their prying eyes and wagging tongues.

"Well you worry too much. I have been taking care of myself for the last fourteen years without problem." Marie patted the hand coiled around her elbow. Thorin sighed and shook his head. "You are an impossible woman Marie Baggins."

"You're one to talk Thorin Oakenshield." She poked his shoulder. "Bloody hell, are you part rock?" She snorted as she shook her hand. The dwarf slowed to a stop and turned her so that faced one another.

A thought came into her head and she voiced it before even thinking it through. "You know there is another thing you lot have in common." She was of course referring to her earlier remark that day.

Thorin stared at the finger she brandished at him, "And what is that?"

"You all love a good party. Like us hobbits," Marie aimed the finger at herself. "Nothing like good food, good drink and good company."

That made the dwarf chuckle, "True indeed."

"What a merry world it would be if that was all anyone needed." Marie mumbled. Thorin had a bittersweet look about him. Or did he? Marie couldn't exactly tell or see for the matter. There was very little light on the landing which did not help Marie's blurred vision.

"What a simple desire." He said.

"Are you calling me simple?"

"No Marie." He at last let go of her. "You are far from simple."

Though she could not see him clearly, Marie envisioned his handsome face with a gentle smile looking down at her. She wanted that.

"Go. Go enjoy your party." She told him with a drunken grin, her hand resting on his shoulder. She craned her neck and went to kiss his cheek. At this point a tiny voice somewhere would be yelling, nay screaming at her to stop before it was too late. But she heard nothing as her lips pressed against
his hot skin. She miscalculated her aim and had caught the corner of his lower lip instead.

She could have moved away then, let it be a simple thankful kiss, a sign of endearment.

But she didn't. This was her dream and she didn't wish to think about right and wrong or anything other than ... she wanted to do this.

She closed her eyes and adjusted her head, pressing another soft kiss on his bottom lip. She savoured the chap texture of it.

Thorin's head tilted down, slotting their lips together.

They were still, the sounds of the party far away from Marie's thoughts.

She never imagined just what it would be like to kiss Thorin, it was surreal and made her fingers and toes tingle when they parted.

'What a delightful dream.' She let her head drop, a shy smile about her face as her vision spun slowly. 'And what delightful branduurrwahaa...?' Her head was tilted back up by Thorin's hand and his mouth crashed into hers with such force it was almost brutish. Marie's head went from spinning to falling in seconds and she froze in shock. His hand slid past her jaw and held the back of her head in place while the other sat perfectly on the small of her back. Any words or sounds she thought to make were robbed of her as Thorin continued to kiss her, harder and more urgently, sending her senses over the edge. Marie could taste the wine on his lips, each touch left a bitter sting on her skin and a fierce hunger for more. Marie gasped as she was pulled into him, her small frame flush against his. Her whole being trembled as the dwarf pressed his advantage. He was a raging inferno that could burn the flesh from her bone.

'It's not real. None of it.'

Marie didn't heed the echoey voice that lingered in the back of her thoughts, in fact it sounded too wayward and careless to be true. It may or may not be real true enough, but Marie didn't care.

'It's not real. So .... let me enjoy it'

She lifted a hand to his cheek and brushed her fingers across his beard. An odd sensation to Marie. It felt rough, but not so much to be considered harsh. Hobbits did not care for beards and always kept their face smooth, clean and presentable, except when eating and drinking. Marie decided, in her dazed state, that she liked this feeling better.

A noise rumbled in Thorin's throat, like a growl, and Marie felt herself being pushed back until her shoulders hit something solid. The wall? The impacted made Marie gasp, her mouth hovering under Thorin's as his ragged breaths came in heavy draws. She felt his lips move against her skin, whispering something with a wanton sigh. Marie intoxicated mind imagined it was her name that he was whispering with such reverence.

When he said it again, Marie heard it, her name on his lips as he kissed her again.

Something ignited within Marie, setting her on fire with something she never experienced before. Unbridled passion, making her blood sing even louder. She had not the strength or the thought to resist it and succumbed in seconds, opening her mouth and allowing Thorin to slid his tongue across hers, coaxing and tempting her as he moved a hand to hold her hip bone. It sent a shiver of pleasure through the hobbit. She tried tentatively to match his kiss with as much vigour but Thorin easily overpowered her.

His grip on her hip tightened sending another shiver up her spine. A shaky moan escaped her and
she clutched the folds of his tunic desperately. She grew dizzy from lack of air yet Thorin showed no signs of relenting. He grew fiercer with his touch, his lips hungry and possessive as they left her lips and trailed across her burning cheek to the patched of skin under her sensitive ear.

The hand in her hair slowly moved from its hold and trailed down her neck, past her collar and over her pounding heart. Marie gasped as the heat of his hand made her skin prickle with delight and sent a jolt of pleasure that settle in her navel. Thorin moved his hand across and grasped at her breast.

The sound she made was positively wanton and Thorin gave his own groan of approval. His other hand wondered from her hip, down her thigh and curved around her arse. He pulled her in so that their hips were flushed together. The pleasure of the motion had her gasp.

'Again.' She thought. 'Again.'

Thankfully he did with a little more strength, and Marie swore under her breath. Her breasts were pebbled and chaffed on her clothes, demanding attention, and she throbbed with need.

But when Thorin bit at her ear, it was enough to snap Marie out of her lustful haze as she registered the pain. She pulled back, but the dwarf's hold on her tightened, his teeth grazing down her neck, tasting her like she was a delicacy from heaven. A sharp twinge when down her shoulder as his canine dug into the still bruised skin.

Marie whimpered and push him way harder.

She ducked her head and her hands held her neck, protecting it as the pain overwhelmed her. They stood there, gasping for air and unmoving. Marie eyes were heavy and she tried to look back up at him, but she sagged against the wall, the world around her a dark blur.

The inferno that had engulfed her slowly withdrew and disappeared all together.

She pulled together the will power to look up but saw no sign of Thorin. She called for him meekly but nothing happen. The joy that had flooded her veins grew weak, leaving Marie feeling cold. He was gone. No ... he was never there.

'It was a dream. No dream could be that real. But it was.'

So she waddled her way to her room, drunk and feeling sheepish. Already the memory of the heat of it, the taste and feeling, all began to fade away like mist in the morning. Marie felt the last bit of tingling on her lips as she tumbled into bed, surrendering to blissful silence.
Thorin had been an idiot. A careless, selfish, foolish idiot.

It hadn't been long since Thorin had excused himself from the celebrations once his foul disposition became more noticeable when he snapped at Fili. Poor lad had only asked if he wanted another ale. After a long climb up the stairs he exiled himself to the far corner of his room to think.

His and Marie's room he corrected himself, even if it still felt utterly wrong to do so.

The only things that stirred were the flames on the candles lighting the room and the sleeping hobbit herself, curled into the giant pillow on her side with her body rising and falling under the weight of her left arm that lay across her waist. A position she often fell into when sleeping.

Thorin sat further back into the large chair and forced himself to look out the tall window that gave him full view of the Lonely Mountain. The clouds had come in low over the town and frost had formed over the poor glass, but the mountain's peek could still be seen.

He was so close. In one day's time he would be home again. Home, in great halls of history and mines rich with gems and gold. And his people's treasure would be theirs again.

The bargeman's words came back to him, how it had been his grandfather's fault that the dragon had come, that the dragon had burned his ancestor's home and taken Thorin's for himself.

'The blind ambition of a mountain king.'

Surprisingly, Thorin's anger at the mortal man did not burn as harsh as it had in that tense standoff before the Master of Lake Town. It filled him bitterness to admit some truth to Bard's words, but he wasn't Thror. He was stronger, more aware of the weakness and would not yield to it.

He had meant every word, He would return Erebor to the glory it once was, all will prosper in its wealth and the East would flourish again. This is what he wanted more than anything.

Or so he desperately wanted to believed.

A groggy moan drew his attention, but it was only Marie. Her small frame shifted so she lay on her back before stilling again. This had happened the previous night. Thorin had watched her fidget and tussle about in the sheets in the throes of a dream for the better part of an hour. She looked so small on the bed, gentle...helpless.

Thorin sighed and ran a hand through his thick black mane.

What had he done?

Taken advantage of a woman in a vulnerable state that's what.

Not just any woman. Marie. Marie, oh Mahal preserve his soul Marie of all people.

And he had hurt her, as his overbearing guilt kindly reminded him.

His hand came back roughly over his face until his thumb and index pinched the bridge of his nose. It would have been so easy to blame it solely on the wine or the hobbit for her own innocent slip of affection, but there was no denying they were both acting on a much deeper, primal desire.
Thorin always thought himself as a dwarf of integrity, and his decisions fraught with good intentions. Yes, that was the only reason he went on with the Master's assumption that Marie's was his ... his companion was to keep her safe. He took a deep breath and closed his eyes.

Mariellena Baggins.

Such an enigma she was to him. Just when Thorin believe had had her figured out, she went and flipped his perception on its head in a most spectacular fashion. She was weak in body and strong in mind, naive yet wise, distant and practical but brought a sense great comfort to everyone. Her presence had rubbed off on all his men that much was plain to see.

A challenging woman, but a challenge Thorin had come to accept.

He accepted it the day she placed herself between Azog and himself, waving about her blade and defending him. Thorin had never seen something so foolhardy and brave.

He would not doubt the fact that something had shifted between them in the past few weeks after that encounter. Thorin would call it a shared fondness for one another, but any wise being would be wary of just how quickly the fondness for someone could spiral into more passionate cravings.

It still made his stomach knot up when he remembered how her head accidentally lent against his shoulder as she chuckled at something, their arms lined together on the bridge rail, her glorious eyes alive with intrigue as he told her of the great triumphs of the dwarves while she in return talked of grand parties when all of her kin would celebrate for no other reason than to simply enjoy themselves.

Then there was before. Desire was still gnawing in his belly at the thought of it. He could still recall holding her in his arms, her gentle touch across his jaw, and her kiss ...

Thorin's jaw locked as the knot within him grew tighter. Her kiss had sent a heat as hot as dragon fire burning through his veins with sheer want.

For a short period of time, he had forgotten his quest, the dragon, the throne, the Arkenstone. All there was ... was her.

His burglar. His comrade. His friend. His Marie.

His.

No.

Not his.

Never his.

There was another groan from the bed, only this one sounded different. It sounded painful.

Thorin pulled himself up from the chair and was around the large bed standing over the hobbit in seconds. Marie had one hand clutching the sheets tightly as her breathing became sharper. Marie's eyes flickered under their lids but remained closed as she continued to dream on. Judging from the constricted look on her face it was a not a very good dream.

Her right hand rested next to her head, fingers curled into a soft fist. Thorin tilted his head and stared at it curiously. It looked like there was something hidden in her hand, something that just peeked out between her fingers.
The dwarf was sorely tempted to see just what.

He went to open her fist, but when his fingers came within a hair's breadth of her hand Marie's whole body gave a sudden twitch. "Nnnooo." She croaked as she rolled onto her side, pulling herself into a tight ball with her hands braced across her chest. "Mmm ... mm.. mine."

Thorin withdrew his hand and sat himself on the edge of the bed. He watched her, study her, noticed the minor things that made her ... well her. The curve of her cheeks that were usually tainted red like apples in the sunlight, the brown ringlets that had pulled free from the braided crown and had fallen across her face, even the glimmer of a small scar along her temple. That scar had defiantly not been the there when she had left her home.

The flowers that made up her crown were wilted and many had fallen from their place. Thorin imagined how she would look with a real crown of gold and bronze.

Marie whimpered again, her brow furrowed and her breathing escalated.

Thorin wasn't a dwarf to panic, but at that moment Thorin could feel his pulse rising as he struggled with the idea of shaking her awake if only to stop her nightmare. Such a thing may earn him a violent smack from the startled woman so he chose a more gentle approach. He brushed a curled knuckle over the pale scar with a feather light touch.

He received no response, so he brushed her skin again and the hobbit began to relax, her eyelids stopped flickering which was a first. He repeated the action over and over, finding himself falling into a rhythm. Dis had done this to the boys when they slept in their cradles, something she had picked up from their own mother. He found it soothing and hoped it would work on Marie.

He expected her to feel warm, flushed from all the merrymaking of the night. But her skin was like ice.

How was she so cold?

He turned his hand over and pressed his palm against her head, his thumb stroking the space between her brow and hairline. The lines around her eyes began to fade and her arms unfurled from her body into a much more comfortable position.

Relief came over Thorin to see her pain easing, but a sharp pang in his chest followed by the thought, 'You should never have let her in so closely,' made him retract his hand. 'Would you risk everything you have achieved for a woman?' The voice in his head hissed again. 'She has no place amongst you.' Thorin tried to banish the voice, but it only grew stronger with bitter reason. 'Would she ever be happy to be bound to a king, to be shut away like a precious gem? No ... you know that her heart lies in the green field of her home. You would only hurt her.'

All of a sudden, the crown Thorin had envisioned for Marie turned to chains.

'She is of the earth, tender and soft. You are of stone. Cold. Enduring. What hope does the flower have to flourish in the shadow of the mountain?'

As of coxed by the voice, Thorin found himself pulling away from the bedside and back to his place at the window, away from Marie. Each step he took left a foul feeling in his chest.

'You would only hurt her.'

Thorin sat himself into the chair and looked back out the window, praying that Marie would think their passion a flitting illusion of a dream. Yes it would be ... better this way. For both their sakes it
was ... better.

He had to harden his heart, else they would break each other’s.
'Blue gray? Turquoise? Azure? Periwinkle? ’ There were many names for the colour blue, but finding the right one was a challenge.

It had been a very early start for the mountain, so early the sun had barely crept up over the edge of the world. The company's send off may have been a grand send off indeed but to Marie, the sight of the Lonely Mountain at dawn was far more grander than the Master and his very, very, very loud fanfare. Their small vessel had made it to the edge of the lake by the time the sun had completely cleared the horizon and shone upon the mountain, colouring the snow and clouds a shade of faded pink and silver, but the sky ... it was a beautiful blue. But what kind of blue?

The reason for the hobbit's fascination with the colour blue was out of need to focus her mind on something other than the painful headache she was enduring. It was her own fault for letting herself get drunk, but it would help if she could remember just how much she drank.

She glanced back at the dwarves, hard at work pulling the barge onto the show and in fighting condition. How they managed to fight off their own hangovers was a mystery to Marie. They did look slightly uncomfortable with the plates of armour and robes they had been given, it made them look even bulkier.

Chances were most of the armour will be left behind, all the dwarves required was the weapons.

Marie's eyes drifted from the dwarves to the faded outline of Lake Town. The armour would not be the only thing left behind.

Poor Bofur had been nowhere in sight when they boarded the barge, and Thorin made the choice to leave without him, right before he command Kili to remain behind under the pretences of him 'slowing them down' but they all could see it was out of concern for the young dwarf. Despite the quiet words of reassurance from Thorin, Kili had not taken the news well. Fili and Oin chose to remain with him, bring the company to a total of ten.

The pounding commence again and the hobbit went back to her colour listing.

When that failed to calm her head, she tried once more to remember.

Her memory was in tatters and no matter how much she tried to piece it back together, she still could not determine what had really happened and what her mind had just made up. There was singing, that much was she was positive. Then she remembered spinning so ... that meant dancing? Then the itching in her throat ... that was brandy ... then ... warmth ... engulfing her to the point of burning. She couldn't even recall how she got up the stairs.

She brought her hands that she had clasped together tightly to her face and warmed them with her breath.

There was that dream.

She had been walking away from the festivities in jolly spirits and into the darkness, unafraid of it for the first time. From the dark something had taken hold of her arms and trapped her. A shadow loomed over her, cerulean blue eyes filled with desire as she kissed it sweetly. Her body shiver under the large red cloak around her shoulder as she recalled the dream kiss. It was felt so ... real. The unabashed passion she had felt when the shadow drew her in, demanding all of her, the want to be touch by it filling her soul. It had all but devoured her before it was gone in an instant. Then the
fire came for her. It did not burn her, but chilled her to the bone and made her weep frozen tears. She was trapped again, but by the unrelenting glare of a dragon's eye until she awoke.

'Ugh, why? Why did I drink?'

"Leave all that can be spared behind. We must reach the overlook by midday." Thorin ordered. Marie eyes were instantly drawn to him, standing on the lake's edge like a conqueror.

He was staring intensely at the mountain.

'Thorin has cerulean eyes.'

Her face went red and she quickly quelled her thoughts.

As she had predicted, the dwarves left the breastplates, helmets and fur capes in the barge, strapping the water and rations bags to their backs.

Marie chose to part from her own cloak, it would only slow her down. Besides, the cold would help knock some sense into her.

The hike through the barren terrain brought back memories of the days spent wandering the Misty Mountains. She remembered the bitter feelings of then but also the nostalgia and humour of it, however little there was before the goblin incident.

As the morning rolled on and the cold winds finally blew away the last of the painful pulses in her head, Marie took note of the lack of colour in the world. Strange how at dawn there was colour everywhere she turned, yet here at the very edge of the mountain, a grey ash had settled over them, topped with tiny white flakes of snow. The sun still shone through the clouds, but brought no light with it.

Was this what Durin's day was, a blank beginning for a new year? Marie mentally shook her head. If she had learnt anything about dwarven culture, both through storytelling and seeing it first hand, such an event would not be deemed so somber. This place was void of ... anything. Even the Misty Mountains had, in it's own cruel manner a feeling of life.

"Up here!" Dwalin called from up ahead. He had strayed off course and stood on a the top of rocky slope.

Marie walked alongside Balin as the company came to the peek. Out of habit, Marie came up beside Thorin. He did not acknowledge her, which seemed a little odd to Marie, but when she looked out at the sight before them it instilled a sense of horror in the hobbit.

Ruins of a large city, blackened and frozen in the grasp of time, stood alone on the base of a small mountain, some of the long gangways leading from ground up to what may have been the city gates were smashed and high towers were as jagged teeth in the sky line. Some were crushed, small melted. Marie knew with sickly certainty what she was looking at, but the question still escaped with the heavy breath she let go of.

"What is this place?"

"'Twas once the city of Dale. Now it is a ruin." Balin answered her. "This is the power of dragon fire. The desolation of Smaug."

Marie gulped.
"The sun will soon reach midday. We must find the hidden door before it sets." Thorin said, glancing up at the sun hidden behind a passing cloud. The dwarves took this as a cue to move out, but Marie remembered one of the last things Gandalf had told them.

"Wait, isn't this the ... The overlook?" She asked, looking around for someone to hear her. Funny enough, Thorin did. He stopped and looked back at her.

"Gandalf said to wait for him at the overlook. This is the overlook."

Thorin made to step towards her, but he caught himself quickly and kept the distance. "Do you see him?"

"No but .."

"Then we move without him." Thorin's face was stiff as he spoke. He turned away from her quickly leaving a perplexed Marie behind.

She trotted softly after the dwarf, "But if we are to face the thing that caused that," she waved a hand out back at the ruins, "Surely a wizard would be, oh I don't know, very useful to ..."

"We can not afford to wait for the wizard Miss Baggins. We are in our own."

Marie slowed her pace. What had his britches twisted?

The company came to a cross road, one path to Dale, the other to the gates of Erebor. Thorin pulled the map from his cloak and showed it to Balin. "We best to head west side and star along there. The secret passage would most likely come up into one of the main walk ways. That is if my memory serves me right"

Thorin nodded. "Bombur, take Bifur and begin scouting along there," He indicated to the closest point at the base. "Nori, Gloin, Ori, you take the western face."

As the dwarf focused on ordering the remaining dwarves, Marie snuck around him and peeked over his arm at the map.

"The marker is here. Should we be looking for perhaps a path up the mountain towards the north si ...?"

"Miss Baggins you go with Dwalin." Thorin barked, cutting her off.

"I'm just saying that the marker .."

"Go now."

That made Marie raise an eyebrow. Now she was certain there was something and he was pushing her way on purpose, and she did not like it.

"Come on lass. Let's put those sharp eyes to good use." Dwalin soothed out the sudden tension in his usually gruff manner and started for the mountain. Marie, feeling hurt by Thorin's quick dismissal of her, followed Dwalin.

"You've turn out well today." The warrior said off handily.

Marie stubbed a toe on a rock. "I ... pardon me?"

"I must say I'd never peg you for a jolly drunk."
'Oh bugger.' Marie could feel the colour leaving her face. "Iyaya ... I think my head is still a bit foggy, but no real harm. Wwwwhat did I do?" She asked, dreading what she might learn.

"Oh don't worry lass, you did nothing. Which was more than can be said about some of those upstanding guest we dined with." Marie's relief was brief at best. "You did disappear so suddenly I had cause to worry until Thorin assured me you were safe and sound"

The hobbit hit her toe again. "Really? He, he said that?"

The slight shrug of his shoulders meant yes.

"Right." Marie sucked in the mountain air and quickly changed the subject. "Where to start?"

"Good question lass." Dwalin's fingers tightened around both his weapons, "Now if I take this side you can search the higher terrain."

Marie nodded and began her search. She looked for anything that would indicate a door of a secret entrance but nothing substantial came up in her search. She climbed up the mountain side, patted random rocks and kicking away dirty. Still nothing. She could also here the shouts of colourful words from the others, meaning no one was having any luck finding the door.

"Anything?!

"Nothing! There's nothing!"

"Keep looking!"

Marie gave an exhausted puff and scratched at the back of her neck. Something was prickling at her skin. She looked up and caught the sun dipping beneath a cloud. It was well pass midday.

'That's not good.' She thought, her fingers tracing around to catch the curls that blow across her cheek. Before she was even aware she was doing it she was looking to Thorin to get his reaction to it all.

He was not too far from her, just below the ridge Marie was standing on. He was studying the map earnestly, glancing up at the mountain every few seconds until he caught Marie watching him.

He stared at her was a strained look in his eye, but as quick as he captured her gaze he looked back down at the map. What had she done? Had she said or done something that unintentionally insulted him? She could not fathom what.

She pressed a finger into her temple, rubbing it in a circle.

'Come on Marie, think.' She said quietly, grinding her jaw. 'Think. THINK! Why don't you just ask him?' Logically that seemed the easiest route. 'You did disappear so suddenly ... Thorin assured ... you were safe.' Then it hit her. Last night in the shadows. She didn't ... no. No she couldn't have. Or had he ...? She brushed a finger tip against her lips and the whispers of her dream lover seemed fresh on her lips.

'Cheese and biscuits.' Marie thought and immediately wanted to smack herself. 'This will do you no good. Now you need to focus on the door and worry about what may or may not have been later.'

And she did just that, ignoring the weighted feeling in her gut and the fluttering of her heart.

She pictured the ancient map before her as best as she could remember it, the inky hand pointed to
the marker, or a dwarven ruin? That was the door, the door to the lower halls. Then the door should be around the base. But Marie could see in her mind the marker being in the middle of the mountain. She remembered Balin mentioning the many layers of Erebor. Could the lower halls be that high up? Then there were the hidden moon ruins.

As Marie dissected the layers to her new challenge, the complicated emotions about Thorin fell into the deepest recesses of her mind to fester.

"Stand by the Grey stone when the Thrush knocks, and the setting sun with the last light of Durin's Day shall shine upon the Keyhole." Marie murmured. "West facing were the sun sets," Marie turned herself around and took long steps northward. "Up high ... straight up on the side." Her hands, held before her like she was holding an invisible box, moved in accordance with the mountain in her mind, tracing the image. "Look behind the stone."

She could see it, where she needed to go and her feet took her there. She was sure she got some quizzical looks from the dwarves as she passed them. Her pace picked up when she spotted from a hidden curve in the mountain a set of stairs carved into the rock. They continued up and up until they joined with a giant stone statue.

"Up Here!" Marie shouted to the dwarves. She turned around and saw the sun dipping ever so lower in the western sky.

~*~

Not a single complaint was uttered from the dwarves or the hobbit as they climbed the stairs up the statue. It was no easy climb by any means and required careful footing when the steps narrowed, so Marie the so dubbed expect climber of the lot went first and instructed the dwarves where to place their large boots. As the stairs reached the right shoulder of the statue they came upon a ledge of uneven ground, walled in by grey stone.

Marie felt Throin pass her as she just about ran to the stone wall, muttering to himself, "This must be it. The Hidden Door."

It had to be. The setting sun was casting its light on the right spot on the map and Balin had confirmed that this part of the mountain would in all probability lead to the lower halls.

Thorin pulled the iron key from his tunic and held it proudly before the company. "Let all those who doubted us rue this day!" He said and the dwarves cheered. They were there, they had made it. But there was still the task of finding the keyhole. Marie stepped to the side to let others climb up onto the ledge.

She glanced over at the sun sitting on the outline of Mirkwood, burning bright through the scattered clouds. If anything was going happen now would be the most opportune moment. But something seemed to be missing, or so a small voice in Marie's mind kept saying.

"The last light of Durin's Day will shine upon the Keyhole." Thorin said.

Dwalin placed his two weapons down and began searching for it. "It must be somewhere round 'bout ..." He brushed away moss and lichen with his stubbed fingers.

After a few moments of unsuccessful prodding, Nori stepped up with a cup and spoon, most likely
stolen from the Master's home, and settled himself along the wall, tapping it with the spoon and
to listening for something. But the shadow they were casting were growing longer the more they
Dwalin took another approach and banged his fists on the stone.

"Be quiet. I can't hear when you're thumping." Nori snapped at him.

Dori and Gloin looked about with a nervous look in their eyes with Marie caught in the middle with
Ori. "What if we lose the sun?" Gloin asked. Ori shrugged while his brother whispered frantically
under his breath. Despite losing more of the light and the dwarves starting to panic, Marie
remained abnormally calm.

"It's not here!" Dwalin shouted and picked up an axe.

"Break it down!" Thorin ordered and Gloin, Bifur and Dwalin took to the stone, sending Nori
scuttling away from the swinging weapons. But Marie watched the sparks fly at the metal it the
stone loudly, two axes actually shattered leaving the dwarves to beat wood on stone.

"Come on!"

"It's no good!" Balin said over all the noise. "The door is sealed, it can't be open by force. There's
powerful magic on it."

The dwarves ceased beating the stone and the light faded.

Marie looked again as the amber rim of the sun disappeared behind the mountains in the far west.

"No, NO!" Thorin pulled the map out so quickly that over folded edges of it began to tear. "The
setting sun with the last light of Durin's Day ... will shine upon the key hole." He raised his head
and Marie was caught by his expression.

It looked as though he had de-aged by about thirty years and was a youth standing before his elders
in judgement for his faults, or in this case, a uncrowned king before his company. "That's what it
says." His voice was so fragile it pained her to see him so ... vulnerable. He turned to Balin, "What
did we miss? Balin?"

But Balin shook his head. "We've lost the light. There's nothing more to be done."

No. This wasn't supposed to happen ... Was it? They were dwarves, they didn't just give up. Marie
was shaking her head as one by one the dwarves turned to head back.

"No, you ... you can't just ... Wait wait wait." It Marie several stuttering syllables until she found
her voice. "You can't give up now."

But they were not listening. They heard nothing over the woes of defeat. Thorin looked down right
heartbroken, the map limp in one hand and the iron key in the other. "Thorin?" Marie asked. Surely
he, of all people not simply throw it all in. But as she watched the key slide from his fingertips, she
could feel the disappointment of the dwarf king with a resounding thunk of the key hitting the
ground.

He turned away from the hidden door in shame and began after his company.

But Marie was not quite ready to give up.

"Now wait. Thorin, just ..." When the dwarf did not respond and passed her in silence, Marie had
finally had enough. She grabbed his wrist and put herself in his path. "Now you listen and you
listen well you block head." Marie didn't care anymore what was going on said or unsaid between
them, he would hear her out. "When you lot first stumbled into my home, raided my pantry and sat at my table, I was about ready to throw you out by the ear until you told me about Erebor. Your conviction moved even a started old hobbit into a tiz and, despite my misgivings and apprehension, I have followed you across half way across the world."

If she could see it, she would see eight dwarves stopping in their tracks to watch Thorin Oakenshield being scolded by a woman almost half his height.

She squeezed his wrist tightly and Thorin blinked. There was a look Marie was much more comfortable with. It was a look he gave her when she managed to surprised him. "I have not been almost eaten by trolls, beheaded by a goblin, chased after by bears, wargs and giant bloody spiders, half drowned and battered about like a doll just to finally get here and have you quit on me." She released his hand and took the map from him. "No there is more to this. It's a riddle, it has to be."

"There's nothing more." Thorin murmured.

"Just let me help. I said I would and I intend to keep my word." Marie walked around him, eyes fixed where the moon runes were hidden on the map. "There's no riddle I haven't been able solve."

A deathly silence fell over the dwarves as they waited for something, either for the hobbit to admit defeat or for miracle.

Marie's fingers tapped against her side as she stared at the stone, muttering the same thing over and over. "Stand by the Grey stone when the Thrush knocks." They were missing something. When the Thrush knocks. Was it a literal instruction or not? Knocking? She remembered back home hearing them hitting freshly caught snails along the stone steps at dusk before she'd retire for the evening. Then that phrase. "The setting sun with the last light of Durin's day. Setting sun, last light of Durin's day ... Durin's day, last light, last light ... of course." Marie turned sharply, "Balin. Do you remember when I asked you about Durin's Day? Back in Rivendell?" She asked, waving a hand about to conjure the memory.

"Aye, that you did."

"You said something about the moon."

"You mean about the start of the new ...?"

"No before that. What was it that actually happens during Durin's day?"

"The last moon you mean? The last moon of Autumn and the first sun of Winter appear in the sky together."

"Yes. That. That is it." Marie exclaimed and bounded over to the discarded key. "It's all in the riddle. Yes yes yes, so easy to mistake that for sun."

"Miss Baggins, you might want to fill us in what mistake was made." Balin stopped the hobbit's rambling.

"It's not the light of the sun." Marie said with an odd smile, "What is the last lot of light on any day?" The dwarves looked at her as if she had lost the plot completely. She looked up at the cloudy sky. "Durin's Day isn't over. The sun is gone but what remains,"

Thorin and Balin looked up into the sky and one by one so did others. The moon in question still remained cloaked by clouds. "Is moonlight. To be more precise, the last moon of Autumn."
There was a tapping coming from behind Marie. She looked around and saw a tiny brown bird striking a snail on the stone. Its shell cracked and the thrush joyfully chirped as it ate its prize. The clouds shifted and the crescent moon finally showed itself.

Marie felt her mouth hinging as the stone wall turned to silver white as the moonlight hit it. The colours shifted until Marie saw a small hole appeared. She glanced down at the key in her hand and back at the hole with a giddy laugh. The dwarves could not believe that yet again their burglar had produced yet another miracle. Thorin seemed too shocked to look cross with her.

Then it dawned on Marie. "I believe," She addressed Thorin in a much more controlled tone, "The honor is yours." She held out the key to him.

Slowly, Thorin approached her and took it, his eyes never leaving her's.

It was a tense few moments as Thorin placed the key inside the key hole, a perfect fit. He turned it once and placed both hands on the door. With one push the stone opened back with a long winded groan. A wave stagnant air hit Marie but it quickly faded. The dwarves crept in behind Thorin as he entered his home for the first time him centuries. Marie thought it best let the dwarves go first, but Bifur silently hooked her and pulled her in along with himself and Bombur.

He did not want her left behind it would seem.

She shuffled along until over head she saw the dark green walls of the tunnel and the carvings that went along the borders. Lines of intricate patterns and runes ran perfectly along the wall, but Marie was taken in by a large mural above the hidden door. She couldn't quite make it out in the dim light, but thankfully Gloin began interpreting the runes.

"Here in lies the seventh kingdom of Durin's Folk. May the Heart of the Mountain unite all dwarves in defense of this home."

Balin came up beside Marie as she studied the image. "The Throne of the King." He told her.

"And what's … that above it?" She meant the small diamond like carving above it.

"The Arkenstone."

Marie blinked. "Arkenstone." She had heard that word before. The Elven King mentioned it when he had Thorin. "And what's that?"

"That, Miss Baggins, is why you are here."
Throughout her childhood, Marie hadn't paid much mind to the tales of dragons. To the gentle hobbits such creatures were all but myth, a frightening image to give a story's hero a worthy adversary. Now, as she headed towards her own tale's fearful beast, Marie tired to think back on any piece of information those tales told about them.

Old Took told many tales but her uncle Hildigrim Took had a particular fondness for dragon stories, more so for the ludicrous idea of dragons. He talked about how a dragon could flatten trees with one beat of its wings and how their chest would glow when they breathed fire, how a mighty roar could deafen one's ears, see into its prey soul, there was even a joke about never giving your name to a dragon for should it learn it you would be its slave for an eternity. However trivial these facts were, they help Marie a great deal to keep her fear from making her turn around.

Balin accompanied her through the trickier part of the tunnel until she could find her own way down to main hall. Despite being away from it all for so long, he walked with such confidence it didn't seem like it.

The others remained above, waiting for Marie to complete her task.

"So let me see if I've got this." Marie said, "My job now is to go and find a single jewel."

"Aye. A large white jewel."

"I might need a little more than that. Kili and Fili told me about this treasure and I can imagine there are a lot of white jewels down there."

"There is only one Arkenstone my dear and believe me when I say this, you will know when you see it."

"And this jewel is what? A symbol or something?" Marie asked.

"In a manner. When the Arkenstone was found here in the mountain, all seven clans swore an oath of allegiance to whoever possessed it, in this case the king. If Thorin is to bring the clans together he will need the Arkenstone to prove his claim."

"So … it is precious to him."

"Oh aye, very precious."

Marie nodded her head. "Right then." Balin suddenly stopped and sighed. "Balin? What's wrong?"

Marie touched his arm.

"In truth lass. I … do not know what you will find down there." Balin said shaking his head. Marie knew he was referring to both the treasure and the dragon. "You needn't go if you don't want to. There's no shame in turning 'round now, not after all that you have done for us."

"No Balin." Marie held up a hand to silence him. "I agreed to become your burglar and I gave my word I would help." She put her hand down when noticed her fingers trembling. "Not point telling you I'm not afraid, but I must at least try to do my best."

Laughter filled the dark tunnel as Balin shook his head at her. "It never ceases to amaze me." He
said.

"What?"

"The courage of hobbits."

Marie smiled at looked down at her feet. "It's taken a lot for me to find mine again." She said. "But still, it's very humbling none the less."

"I can see why he is so taken with you."

The hobbit's head snapped up. "He?" The look in Balin's eyes told her enough and her ears quickly turned red. "I … we …. that's not …"

But Balin just shook his head "No need to explain yourself. Now go, with as much luck as you can muster." And with clap her shoulder, Marie knew there was no other option than keep going forward.

The two parted ways, Balin back the way they had came and Marie down the steps and to the right as she had been instructed. 'At the end of the path, take the last corner.' She tried to pick up her pace, but her feet felt heavy. She breathed in deeply through her nose to keep calm as she turned the last corner.

The doorway into the lower hall stood before her, the rows of staircases and carved pillars Thorin had spoken of could be seen. Marie could feel her heart in her throat. It was now or never. She stepped through the archway and into the hall. Above her to could see the city stretched up high into the mountain, a maze of stairways and passages. But the sight below took the hobbit's breath away.

The great treasure of Erebor.

A sea of gold that filled the vast hall as far as the eye could see. A mountain within a mountain. The sheer size of the horde was too large for Marie to believe and she rubbed her eyes to be sure. Such wealth could not have been the dwarves alone, if there was any truth to dragon stories, the treasures if Dale and other kingdoms must lie within the horde. No sign of a dragon though. Marie must have stared at the gold for a good few minutes before making her way down into it. She kicked at large coins that were scattered about the stairs, trying to not make a racket as she stepped onto the mountain of treasure.

'So much for being light on my feet.'

She thought, her feet slipping and clicking coins together. She started her search at a nearby mass of jewels and chests, sorting through it in the vein hope one of them would be the Arkenstone. She found plenty of beautiful necklaces and large chunks of crystals, even daggers with stunning gems inlaid along the blades, but none of them what she wanted. "I'll know it when I see it ... brilliant." Marie muttered.

This was going to be a long task.

During her long climb up the pile, Marie took note of the other items the dragon had collected. There were an assortment of shields and armour pieces, instruments made from shimmering silver and fine tapestries that were stuck under the numerous pieces of gold. For a beast, the dragon had impeccable taste. Marie huffed and carried on. She had forgone the use of being quiet since there was still no sign of the dragon. Either the beast resided in a different part of the mountain or he had died. It must have taken an hour of sifting through the treasure before she neared the top of the
pile. There was still a good fifty feet between the peek and the ceiling of the hall and Marie dreaded just how much more gold she would see from the top. A piece of white caught her eye and she automatically went to pick it up, causing a steam of coins to start sliding. What she grabbed was a small goblet with a diamond base.

'Fancy' Marie thought, then noticed the coins still cascading down at her feet. She looked up saw a large pile shift, revealing a closed eye of a dragon. Marie choked on her sharp intake of air.

The dragon was in front of her, buried beneath the wealth of Erebor. His deep red scales reflected against the gold with an eerie beauty that distracted Marie. 'Not good, not good, not good.' She quickly backed herself behind a pillar, jumping as a loud puff sent coins flying. Now his snout poked out of the treasure. Marie prayed that he wasn't going to wake up. The sound of her pulse racing was so loud she was sure the dragon could hear it. She stilled every muscle in her body and waited. Another sound came from her left and she glanced over out of the corner of her eye. Spikes ... and a tail.

The dragon was curled at the top of the heap.

It shift all the way round to in front of Marie, moving the gold about to form new piles. Marie must have step on the dragon's tail on her way up without realising it. 'Just how big is this thing?!' Marie's mind panicked wildly before she regained herself. 'Time to be going I think.' But as she tip toed her way back down the treasure, the dragon's head moved after her from under the pile. The wave of coins pushed the hobbit over. The taste of copper filled her mouth as she bit her tongue suppressing a whimper. 'Okay Marie, just ... remember to breathe. In and out, in and out.' She looked around to check. The muscles around the eye twitched and very slowly the lid opened. Marie ducked and pressed herself a pile, hoping beyond hope it couldn't see her. 'But it can't with the ring.' The moment of clarity she needed. The sound of the coins falling was enough incentive to pull out her ring. Once it was around her middle finger, the magic brought back some of her courage. She stood slowly and watched the dragon pull himself up from the gold.

Smaug the Terrible had awoken. He was a monstrous size, crowned with horns and covered with ancient scars. The hue of his scales shone as bright as the gold under the magic of the ring, but his eyes remained sharp and vigilant, scanning across the horde with the edges of his mouth pulled back, baring rows of white teeth. Marie believed herself safe and in control of herself once more now that she was invisible, that is until the dragon spoke.

"Well, thief." The depth and power of Smaug's voice made it feel as if Marie had been struck in the chest. Smaug bent his head low and skimmed it along the gold. Marie sunk her knees as the dragon passed over her, heat radiating off his body. "I smell you. I hear your breath. I feel your air." It was an ancient sound with all the gravity of a beast but also the smooth clarity of a man. His neck curved around and his massive head came back towards Marie, "Where are you?" He came so close his breath fanned across the hobbit's face, "Where are you?"

Out of desperation, Marie made a run for it, hurling herself downhill, Smaug snarled and followed after the sound, sliding over the gold as if it was water. Marie tripped and tumbled over her head twice, scrapping her forehead on the treasure. She quickly got o her feet and dodged the incoming dragon by hiding behind another pillar. She clutched the stone tightly and kept her back to it, holding her breath as Smaug's claw closed around the pillar, right above her head. He stopped himself and rose up, coins falling off him.

"Come now. Don't be shy." He said coyly, but quickly snapped, "Step into the light!"
When Marie said nothing, he turned back the way he came. His movements reminded Marie of a serpent, elegant and quick.

"There is something about you."

Marie spun around in time to see the dragon come around the other side of the pillar, his eye glowing brighter with ever step the hobbit took away from him. "**Something you carry. Something made of gold, but far ... more ... precious.**"

*Precious ... precious ... my ... precious*

That single word made the magic cloaking her thick with pain until it was like a iron shaft in the back of her mind. It grew stronger and stronger until an eye veiled in fire flashed before her eyes. She shut them tight and yanked the ring off her finger.

'*Oh oh'*

Marie had made a terrible mistake.

She opened her eyes, only to come face to face with the glowing dragon eye, much clearer and more dangerously alluring.

"**Ah, there you are, Thief in the Shadows,**"

She had no cloak of magic now, her sword would be absolutely useless, all she was her talent for words to defend herself. "I ... I ... I didn't come to steal from you ... oh Smaug the ... unnecessarily wealthy." She hadn't been eaten or burnt to a crisp yet, that was a good start. "I merely wished to gaze upon you with my own eyes to see if the all the stories were true. I admit I did not truly believe them."

Smaug drew back sharply, swiping his tail through the gold. He placed his talons before himself and rose up proudly, wings folded along his arms and his golden chest dotted with thousands of gems and coins. "**And do you now!?**" The dragon bellowed.

"Truly ... all the tales I have heard fall utterly short of your enormity ... oh Smaug the Stupendous." Marie said, genuinely awed by the sight.

"**Do you think flattery will keep you alive?**"

Marie finally remembered to blink. "Would it matter to you if I gave either answer? Seeing as how neither would save me."

"**No indeed,**" He lowered himself back down closely to the treasure, "**But tell me, thief, if you were to give me an answer what would it be?**"

"I know without a doubt it would be no. Your great anger knows no bounds and I would be a fool to believe that I would ... be worthy of you mercy."

Smaug chuckled lightly, "**Such a courteous little thing you are. Are you always so full of pretty words?**"

"I was taught to be always give praise to those who have earned it, and from all the tales spoken of oh Smaug the Magnificent, you are worthy of more than praise." Marie couldn't believe the words coming out of her mouth, but luckily the dragon did.
"You seem familiar with my name but I don't remember smelling your kind before." Smaug slowly crept about the hobbit, making it a point to show that he was ready to strike. "Who are you, and where do you come from may I ask?"

'Well at least he has manners.'

But what could Marie say. The old stories made her wary of revealing her name, but if the dragon should be angered by her lies she was doomed. Fanning nervousness, she dropped her gaze to think of an answer. Her eyes fell upon a jewel half hidden by the gold, drawing all her focus and thoughts to it. It appeared too be the size of her fist, maybe bigger, and had a white gleam to it. But within its centre, all manner of colours swirled about in a hailstorm of light.

'You'll know when you see it.'

The Arkenstone.
'You'll know when you see it.'

The Arkenstone.

It was there. Just a few feet from her. She had finally found it ... and the dragon was also a few feet from her.

What rotten timing.

"Who are you?" Smaug repeated, growing impatient. Marie looked up at him.

"I ... I come from under the hill." It wasn't a lie, or the complete truth. But all the same the answer quipped the dragon's interest.

"Under hill?"

Marie quickly nodded. "And under the hill and over the hill my path has taken me. Through the air I am she who walks unseen and is the guest of eagles."

"Impressive." Smaug dipped his head until his hot breath again brushed her skin. "**What else do you claim to be?**" He was so close his voice rattled Marie's bones.

"I am ... The Luck Wearer. Riddle Maker and Web Cutter."

"Lovely titles, go on."

"Ba ... Barrel Rider?"

"Barrels? Now that is interesting." Smaug pulled back, his head in the shadows.

'**What was so interesting about barrels?**'

'**And what of your little dwarf friends mmm? Where are they hiding?**'

That was unexpected.

Marie did her best to look confused rather than shocked. "Dwarves? I'm ... sorry but I've come across a dwarf in my life. You appear to be wrong."

"Oh I don't think so ... Barrel Rider." Smaug looked away from the hobbit briefly, giving her a chance to get closer to the Arkenstone. But not much "**They sent you in here to do their dirty work while they skulk about outside.**"

"No, truly," Marie bowed her head to the dragon. She was losing favor. "You are mistaken oh Smaug, Chiefest and Greatest of Calamities."

A deep rumble from Smaug's chest filled the air, "**You have nice manners, for a thief and a LIAR! I know the smell and taste of dwarf, better than anyone. It is the gold, they are drawn to it like flies to dead flesh.**" But while Smaug ranted and moved about the treasure, Marie again made another attempt to grab the Arkenstone. Just as it was within her reach, one of Smaug's talons crashed down between her and the jewel. The impact sent the Arkentone rolling down the hill of
treasure. Marie groaned and went after it. She had spent so long trying to find the damned thing, she wasn't going to lose it now, dragon or not.

"Did you not think I'd know this day would come!? That a pack of panting dogs would come crawling back to the mountain!?" Smaug called after the fleeing hobbit. He gave chase, his long neck crashing against a weakened pillar. Marie jumped off a steep ledge and into a pile of coins as the pillar cracked and fell. The crash was thunderous and Marie clamped her hands over her ears.

"The King Under the Mountain is dead." Smaug's talon came dangerously close to the frightened woman and she launched herself from her hiding spot. "I took his throne, I ate his people like a wolf among sheep."

Marie could feel the dragon snaking his head above her as she ran. She turned down a stairway Smaug was right before her, with a taunting smirk. With a yelp she forgot the rest of the stairs and jumped the rest of the way, missing his numerous spikes and chipped horns by inches. She could here his terrible chuckle as she kept running.

He was teasing her, making her sweat for his own amusement.

"I kill where I wish, when I wish."

Marie made for an alcove just as the dragon caught up to her. He glided down and landed with a thud on top if the alcove, effectively trapping her inside.

"It's Oakenshield, that filthy dwarvish usurper." He hissed, "He sent you in here for the Arkenstone didn't he?"

Marie looked out of her new hiding spot. 'Where is that jewel?'

"No, I have no idea what you're talking about."

She spotted the jewel just outside the alcove.

"Don't bother denying it I guessed his foul purpose some time ago." Smaug's claw wrapped around a support beam and he pulled himself to the opening. Marie pulled back to avoid his gaze. "But it matters not. Oakenshield's quest will fail. A darkness is coming. It will spread to every corner of the land."

A familiar sense of dread filled Marie's gut. It was the same as that night she had dreamed of that mysterious ruin and the shadow that lingered in its walls.

A shadow.

Smaug's head moved until it was just behind the beam Marie was hiding. "You are being used, Thief in the Shadows." His voice had taken on a more gentle sound, smooth and dare say it comforting. "You were only ever a means to an end. The coward Oakenshield has weighed the value of your life and found it worth nothing."

Marie wanted to snapped back at him, to tell him that he was wrong. But uncertainty made her tongue heavy. "No ... you're lying" She managed to spit out.

"Tell me, what did he promise you? A share of the treasure? As if it was his to give. Or perhaps something more ... personal? A grand throne at his side? A crown of a thousand
precious gems to place on your brow? A hollow promise of devotion and love?" The dragon's words struck hard. No, Thorin made her no such promises, nor would he ever she told herself.

"Your silence is very telling, Barrel Rider. Know this, Oakenshield has room in his heart for one thing only and it will never be you."

Marie shook her head free of the dragon's taunts. It would seem that dragon's could easily enchant with words like in the old stories. 'Just get the stone, get out and away from the beast.' She told herself and ran for the Arkenstone. The ground beneath her feet suddenly rose up and Marie was flying through with air thanks to Smaug's tail, hidden by the gold.

When had he done that? She landed on the end of the slope and rolled across cold stone. What stopped her was her back colliding with an old chest.

"I will not part with a single coin. Not one piece. My armor is iron. My teeth are swords. My claws are spears. My wings are a hurricane. And my breath is death itself!" Smaug roared, opening out his wings until they almost touched the ceiling. The hobbit had the sneaking suspicion that he may have been showing off to himself rather than her, but thanks to his vanity Marie caught sight of a small black hole where a scale should have been on the left side of his chest, just below the wing.

"So the Black Arrow did make its mark." Marie whispered, a small smile on her lips.

"What did you say?" Smaug stopped his preening and growled at her.
Marie righted herself and got to her feet. The Arkenstone was right next to her.

'Third time the charm.'

"I was saying that indeed your reputation does proceed you Smaug the Tyrannical. Truly you have no equal on this earth." She said, glancing briefly at jewel. The dragon, who now balanced between two staircases, glared down at her hard. He had seen her wandering eye.

"I am almost tempted to let you take it, if only to see Oakenshield suffer." He told her.

Marie's chest tightened and looked back at Smaug. He had seen her reaction and knew he had her.
"Yes, a delightful sight for you to witness once you'd given to him. Watch it destroy him, watch it corrupt his heart and drive him mad." He sneered, enjoying the hobbit's tiny form shaking.

Marie wouldn't let that happen, not to Thorin. He was strong, strong and tough, that she was sure of. But still, if she believed in him, why did she still have a sliver of doubt?

"But ... I think not. I think our little game ends here."

Marie heart quickened as Smaug drew back slightly and the scales across his chest and at the base of his neck began to glow. "So tell me, thief, how do you choose to die?!"

~*~

"It's been a long while." Nori remarked offhandedly. Bombur and Gloin nodded but said nothing.
None of the dwarves had spoken since Balin had returned alone with the assurance that Marie was well on her way into the lower halls.

So the wait began, in relative peace until the ground tremble and what sounded like an explosion echoed though the opened door. The silence that had followed since was painful. The sounds from within the mountain were growing more frequent and louder. Every one of the dwarves knew that the cause of such a ruckus was the dragon. The only question now was, was their little burglar the cause of the dragon's waking.

Thorin tried not to imagine the worst. He stared down at the slope of the mountain, twisting the ring around his left middle finger. He had been questioning his decision of sending Marie down into the mountain to find the Arkenstone.

Yes it had been arranged from the beginning that Marie would act as burglar and retrieve the jewel and she agreed to the terms of the contract, but still, Thorin would never forgive himself if something happened to her ...

No, Thorin couldn't allow to think in that manner. She was a lucky lass. She would find the Arkenstone, return unharmed, the stone would be his and he would claim his rightful place on the throne without dispute. The treasure of the dwarves would be theirs. Everything would be as is should be.

Bifur grunted and huffed in his manner, questioning the well being of the hobbit.

"Should we maybe go down and help her?" Young Ori asked.

"No." Thorin shook his head, "Give her more time."

"To do what? To be killed?" Balin barked. For a dwarf of peaceful terms, Balin was slow to anger, but right now he was on edge. Thorin had rarely seen this side of his old friend, so something must have been wrong.

"You're afraid." He stated. The old dwarf turned to him, white brows close together. "Yes. I am afraid. I fear for you." He said, pointing at Thorin. "A sickness lies upon that treasure. A sickness which drove your grandfather mad."

Thorin gritted his teeth and looked away, "I am not my grandfather."

"You're not yourself. The Thorin I know would not hesitate to go in there and he."

"I will not risk this quest for ... for one burglar." He hated to say it, but he needed to hear it from his own mouth.

Balin gave him an incredulous look. "A burglar." He lowered his voice so only Thorin could hear. "After everything that lass has done for this company, is that all she really is to you?"

Before Thorin could even think of how to answer that, a great roar came from the mountain, fueled by anger. The light of dragon fire illuminated the hidden passage. The dwarves stood as one and watched the golden light flood the way.

Every past thought and reservation Thorin had suddenly left him empty but one thing. Wordlessly he moved to the door, grabbing a long sword without breaking stride. Someone called after him, but he did not stop and headed into the passage.
In a darkened corridor, an out of breath Marie collapsed against the wall, pulling off the gold ring. Smaug was still roaring in the great hall and heat poured out of the doorways from his fire. Once Marie caught her breath she made for the stairs aimlessly. Sting thumped against her thigh as she leapt up them, bounding over two at a time.

She had no clue where she was going but as far as she knew it anywhere away from an angry dragon was a good thing.

Smaug had not been pleased with her sudden disappearance when he made to eat her in one fell swoop and in response he unleashed a firestorm into the hall. The hairs on Marie's toes and the ends of some of her curls were singed by the heat of the dragon fire. After a few minutes she came realize she had been running around the same square corridor. She turned left and up more stairs, lost for air again. The stairs led up to an open junction. Marie didn't like the idea of being out in the open and almost turned around, but she spotted someone standing out on the ledge.

It was Thorin, his back to her as he stared out over the ledge with a long sword in hand. Relief gave her enough strength to make it all the way up.

"Thorin." Marie called, but he did not hear her. He remained still, gazing out at the treasure.  
"Thorin!"

The dwarf turned. "You're alive."

"Only just. We have to go." Marie wheezed and hunched over.

"Did you find it? The Arkenstone?"

"Thorin, the dragon is ..."

"The Arkenstone."

Something in Thorin's voice raised an alarm. Marie glance up at the dwarf. He didn't ... look right. The lines bout his eyes were too tight for one thing, and he looked like iron coiled so tightly it would snap. "Did you find it?" He asked, but it sounded more of a threat.

Marie swallowed hard and headed to the exit. "No. Now we need to get out of ... here." A firm hand caught her wrist

'What?'

She tried to take a step away from Thorin but his grip tightened and forced her to stop resisting.  
"What are you ... ?"

Thorin glared at her, almost accusingly. The sword in his other hand looked poised to cut her to ribbons as Thorin forced her back to the edge, trapping her between the twenty foot drop and the sword.

"Alright enough now, you're ... you're hurting me." Marie said, trying to be firm, but the hand around her wrist only continued to squeeze. Any tighter and he would have been able to snap the bone. Thorin's eyes were no longer blue as the sky, but dark, like the color of amber, staring at her as if she was a stranger. Marie was afraid. Afraid that the dwarf before her was not Thorin. "Stop,
Please." She outright whimpered. "Thorin."

Something must have snapped back into place, because Thorin's fingers loosened, confusion settling on his face as he glanced between the petrified hobbit and her trembling arm still in his grasp.

What had just happened?

They didn't have very long to figure it out, since a growling sound caught both of them off guard. Thorin looked over Marie's head, his jaw setting hard. The hobbit followed he gaze and turned in time to see Smaug crawling over the treasure.

Thorin immediately went into a battle stance at the sight of his old foe. Smaug in turn hissed and licked his teeth, eager to taste dwarf flesh again.

"AAAGGGGHHH!" The rest of the dwarves came barreling through a doorway armed and ready. But they all may have reconsidered such a rash decision when they saw the fast approaching dragon.

"You will all burn!" Smaug launched himself towards the company, fire dancing on his tongue.

"Come lads! Down here!" Balin called and the dwarves and Marie jumped off the ledge. They skidded off the gold and into a tunnel before the fire could reach them.

"Run, run, run lads."

"Come on Marie."

"What did you do lass? Poke him in the eye?"

"I didn't do anything!" Marie cried out as another burst of flames entered the tunnel. The company sped up until they came to what looked like an old kitchen. Thorin was the last in and was shaking off his over coat, half of which was on fire. He dropped to the floor and acted as if nothing had happened. "Come on." He ordered and took point. Marie could still hear the roar of dragon fire from above and she began to wonder if any of them were to make it out of the mountain alive.

~*~

It had been a nerve wracking experience trying to making it through the mountain without alerting Smaug to their position. One slight tap with the end of an axe or the shuffle of a pebble would echo throughout the barren halls.

Marie looked over the window ledge on the closed over bridge they were sneaking across and felt her stomach drop.

It was a long down.

She bumped into the back of Bombur and saw that they had stopped. The bridge led out into the open, meaning they would be exposed.

The silence however gave some indication that they may have outfoxed Smaug.
"Perhaps we've given him the slip." Dori whispered. But Dwalin didn't seem that optimistic. "No, he's too cunning for that." Marie had to agree with warrior. Smaug may have been waiting just above the opening to snatch them up one by one.

Thorin finally spoke after what seemed to be hours of silence from him. "We'll head for the western caverns, there may still be a way out there."

"It's too high up."

"It's our only chance Balin."

Slowly and with utmost care, the company walked out into the open, keeping all eyes peeled. The bridge was narrower than before and Marie could feel her balance waver. The rush she had experienced in fleeing Smaug was slowing down, pulling all of Marie's strength with it. If she was not careful she would topple over the side.

She placed her mind elsewhere where to steady her legs and found herself crossing over the old hidden bridge near Brandywine Hall. The technique worked and washed away her nerves and she let the memory consume her thought of a summer night chasing fireflies over the bridge, without a thought for the rushing water beneath her.

'Tink.'

Marie snapped out of her reminiscences and froze on the spot, as did all the dwarves. Marie looked at her feet and saw a single piece of gold next to her foot. Had it slipped out of the folds of her coat? She quickly patted herself down. No it hadn't come from her.

'Please don't let it be ...' But as more coins started to hit the stone, it was clear where they were coming from. Marie and the dwarves looked up and Smaug was passing over head, climbing through the bridges and hooking his claws into the walls. Marie again spotted the small black hole in his chest. Should one get the right opportunity and a sharp enough weapon, they could get the dragon right in the heart.

Such musings would not help them at the moment and the company made it across the bridge in one piece, while Smaug slunk deeper into the mountain in search of them.

"Up the top, go." Thorin led them to a spiral stairway and literally pushed the dwarves up the first step. But when he got Marie, she flinched away from his touch. When they made it to the top, the dwarves huddled together to wait for Thorin and Balin. Marie stood apart from the group as her mind went back to before, the feeling of Thorin's deadly grip still fresh on her skin.

"You alright Marie?"

"Mm?"

Nori placed a hand on her shoulder, "Did you hurt your hand or something?" Marie hadn't noticed that she had been clutching her wrist. "I ... fell. Just a little sore." Nori gave the hobbit's shoulder a light squeeze.

They were now deep in the passages inaccessible to Smaug and with any luck nearer to their freedom. The darkness that engulfed the tunnels was suffocating, and there was a smell of decay in the air. Marie hated to think what would be the source of the stench.

"This way. It's not far." Thorin said and ran down a narrow corridor, the company hot on his heels. But with a sharp turn to the right, the fleeing dwarves and hobbit came to a halt. They had made it
to where the exit they had hoped for would be, only to find half the wall caved in on it. But the most heart wrenching sight was the piles of bodies gathered around the doorway.

"That's it then." Dwalin muttered, "There's no way out."

Marie walked slowly through the frozen company. Men, woman and children, still clinging to their mother's skirts, long since dead and mummified in this makeshift tomb. Marie covered her mouth with her hand, mortified and saddened by the site.

"The last of our kin." She heard Balin mutter. "They must have come here, hoping for an escape." The dwarves around Marie dropped their heads mournfully. Marie too closed her eyes in respect.

What a cruel way for one's life to end.

"We can still make it to the mines. Might last a few days."

"No."

Marie opened her tired eyes. Thorin now stood in the center of the room, surrounded by his fallen kin,

"I will not die like this. Cowering. Clawing for breath." He turned slowly, "We'll make for the forges."

"He'll see us, sure as death." Dwalin said.

"Not if we split up."

"Thorin, we'll never make it."

"Some of us might. Those of us that don't will be avenged." Thorin had regained his spark of iron clad bravery that stirred the loyalty of his men. "We lure him to the forges and we kill the beast." All the dwarves stood a little taller, instilled with the courage of their king.

"If this is to end in fire, then we will all burn together."
Battle in the Forges

'To all burn together.'

It had come to this last ditch effort.

Kill the dragon or die trying.

Thorin had finished briefing the first stages of his plan and had already sent Nori and Dwalin headed out first. Decoys, baiting the dragon down into the forges. Bombur, Dori and Ori took the passage heading south and Bifur and Gloin to the east corridor.

"Now don't let the beast lose sight of you, keep him heading to the forges!" Balin called after them and disappeared into the tunnel.

All that was left was himself, Thorin and Marie. The hobbit was braced against the doorway into the tunnel, feeling woozy. She hadn't given much thought to how she would die, maybe in her armchair when she had reached her time, but not in battle with a dragon. To die for a noble cause, now that would be a tale. But who would tell her tale? Who would remember her? Such things only worsened the unsteadiness in her.

Thorin brushed past Marie and again she drew away from him. This time the dwarf noticed her action.

"What is it?"

"Come, we mustn't delay." Balin's echoed from down the corridor.

Thorin glanced at the sound then back to the hobbit. "Now is not the time to lose courage Miss Baggins. Are you with us?"

"I ..." Marie wished her hand would stop trembling, "Just didn't think this would be how I'd die, that's all." She did a poor job disguising her fear with a shaky laugh.

"Not if we kill that serpent first." Thorin said. He gripped her forearm, and Marie felt a current run through her. "Are you with me Marie?"

She took a long intake of air and, trembling hand and all, place it over Thorin's. "Into the fire." She told him.

"Into hell."

And so into the fray Marie went with Thorin leading her, Balin at her side as they ran with great speed into the cavern. It did not take long for the plan to come into effect.

"Flee ... Flee!" Marie's skin crawled as Smaug's deceptive voice filled the cavern. The trio skidded to a halt as Smaug pulled himself out of his hiding place, coiling his long tail and claws around pillars as he inched towards them. Marie felt a light tug on her coat sleeve and was half hidden behind Thorin, blocking her from the dragon's sight. Smaug noticed this and made a noise that reminded Marie of a snicker. "Run for your lives. There is nowhere to hide."

"BEHIND YOU!"
Smaug whipped his head around just as Dori's group arrived. The dragon changed his target and went for the others. The plan was working.

"Come." Thorin started running again just as Dwalin and Nori took their turn distracted Smaug.

"So we get to the forges, then what?" Marie huffed.

"First we re-light the forges, then we snuff out his fire."

"And how do you propose we do that?"

They came to a junction in the corridor. "That is where you come in Marie." Thorin looked both ways before picking the right pathway.

"It's another right at the bottom of the stairs Thorin." Balin called out from behind. But when they came to them, half the stairs were missing and the remaining pieces were badly cracked. Thorin jumped down with ease. He looked back up expectantly at Balin and Marie. "Jump. I've got you." He said.

"Go on lass, I'm right behind you." Balin gave her the little shove she needed.

Marie steadied her feet on the cracked edge and jumped. As he had promised, there were a pair of waiting arms there to catch her. The hobbit threw her arms around Thorin's neck and she hung in his embrace, feet dangling off the floor. Once she was safe Thorin let her go and turned to Balin. The older dwarf looked to be ready to jump, but an almighty crash accompanied by a roar came from above and the stone all about shook. Balin wobbled on the edge dangerously before moving back. Just in time as the floor he had been standing on gave way.

"Balin!" Thorin cried out.

"I'm alright! Just a little stuck!" He sounded further away than Marie initially thought. "I'll have to use an alternative route! You go on to the Miner's Pass!"

"Stay safe!" Thorin looked loathed to leave Balin behind, but he had no choice. "Come Marie."

He took off into the tunnel. Marie kept up as best as she could, but Thorin moved through the tunnel so quickly she almost lost him. Down into the deep of Erebor they went, the sounds of the dragon not far from earshot. They came to a long room with iron grates in the roof. The room stretched at least fifty feet long and was filled with empty racks.

"What is this?" Marie asked once Thorin slowed down.

"A storage room for the pike axes and hammers. Once those who worked in the deep mines used it to keep spare tools. Right above is the trader's offices."

"And Miner's Pass?"

"At the end of this corridor. It will take us straight to the forges."

The light streaming in from the grates reflect the dust kicked up from their movements. "You still haven't told me how I, of all people am to stop Smaug from burning us all."

"You will see when we get there."

"And how will the forges help? He's a dragon, fire doesn't hurt him." Marie didn't like being naggy but she needed to know.
"It's not the fire I am to use ... quiet."

"What. Use what?"

"I said quiet."

"I only ..."

All of a sudden Marie found herself with a hand closed over her mouth to snuff out any protest. She stared wide eyed at Thorin as he looked up at the roof. It was then Marie heard the thud of footsteps.

Smaug.

A horrible grating noise filled the long room as the end of the dragon's tail brushed against the grates.

Thorin slowly retracted his hand from over Marie's mouth and kept his gaze on the roof, while the hobbit did her best to keep quiet as she heard the dragon sniffing above.

"Where are you, Thief in the shadows?" Smaug growled. "I can practically taste the dwarves' stench on you."

Thorin very quickly had Marie by the waist and dragged her into shadows, putting her against a wall and shielding her with his own body. He held a finger to his lips, to which Marie complied with her kept hers firmly shut.

"Cutting up more webs in the dank and filth are you, thief?" The grates above gave way and one of Smaug's claws came crashing down, shattering the table beneath it. Unable to scream, Marie pressed her face into Thorin chest, her arms like clamps around his waist. Thorin placed a comforting hand at the junction of her shoulders, his jaw against her scalp as he shushed her.

"Here!"

'That's Dwalin.'

The two waited until the sound of Smaug's footsteps were far enough away before they dared to breathe again.

Marie shifted her head and let out a strange sound both a breath and a cry. The hand on her back moved to cradle her head and large fingers threaded through her hair. "He's gone." Thorin hummed.

"Bloody hell Thorin, if this plan of your's works I may kiss you senseless." Marie blurted out. The dwarf went rigid in her arms and pulled away from her, wordlessly moving on between the tables and rack.

"Something I said?" Marie asked, though knowing full well that she had indeed said something she shouldn't have.

"Keep up." Was all she got in response.

The made it to the end of the store room without further complications, other than a door Thorin had to kick down to get up to Min'er's Pass, or so Marie believed with the amount of old of carts and discarded pulleys all the way down the large tunnel.
"You two in one piece I see."

Marie looked around. Balin was shuffling at his pace towards them. The hobbit gave him a small wave of the hand, "You too it thank goodness."

Balin caught the crook of her arm and guided her along. "Best we keep with the lad."

Thorin had already gone on ahead down Miner's Pass, leaving Marie and Balin to trail behind. "Wait lass, it's this way!" Balin had stopped at a door in the wall. Marie had turned back but Thorin was still running in the opposite direction. Balin sighed, "Never had a sense of direction that boy." He grunted.

"Thorin!" Marie shouted at the top of her lungs. That was enough to get him to stop and take notice of his wrong turn. He made to come back, but something made him stop and stare beyond Balin and Marie.

"Oh not again." She whispered as she went to see what had made him stop. Smaug had found them and had his mouth opened and ready.

"Go with Balin!" Thorin shouted to Marie, slowly backing down the pass. Balin grabbed the back of Marie coat and pulled into the safety of the doorway. "Come lass, you heard him."

"No, wait we can't ... no, Thorin!"

She was pulled back just in time as a ball of fire hurled by, blocking the entrance.

"It's no use lass. We have to keep going." Balin to reason with the struggling hobbit.

"I'm not leaving him."

"You're no good to him dead now come."

Seeing no more use in resisting, Marie let the old dwarf drag her by the scruff of her collar into the dark.

'Please be alright Thorin.'

Marie was pulled into a gigantic cavern where nine huge furnaces stood in three rows, blackened with use. Above there were lines of empty pulleys just hanging without purpose and along the floor of the forge lines that were cut into the stone. Marie had seen a forge once on a day trip to Bree. It was an impressive sight for a child then, but now it looked so tiny in comparison to the forges of the dwarves.

At the same time Marie and Balin had made it, Dori, Ori, Dwalin and Bombur came running through a set or enormous metal gates.

"The beast is not for behind!" Dwalin told them.

"Aye. Are Gloin and Bifur not with you?"

"Haven't come across them since the dragon chased them into a mine."

No sooner had Dwalin finished speaking, Nori came running in, with Thorin close behind. Marie fought the urge to run over to him and either hug him or slap him, perhaps both just to be safe.

"It's no use." Dwalin grumbled, "These furnaces are stone cold. We've no fire hot enough to set
them ablaze."

"Have we not?" Thorin questioned as a fierce snarl came from behind the metal gates. Smaug was pulling himself up out of a hole, his whole body shook as he gasped for air. The dwarves must have taken him for a right old run around, exhausting him of most of his energy.

"I did not look for you to be so easily outwitted!" Thorin called out to the dragon.

"Ugh, Thorin," Marie croaked, "Do you know what you are doing?"

"You have grown slow and fat in your dotage, Slug!"

If what Thorin hoped to achieve was to incur Smaug's wrath he certainly succeeded in doing so. The raging dragon finished climbing out of the hole and took a long breath in. Thorin, looking awfully pleased with himself, glanced back at the company, "Take cover." He told them and went behind one of the bars. Quickly catching on, the dwarves and Marie made a dash for the bars, just in time as Smaug fired upon them. The bars were wide enough to protect them from the flames but Marie still felt as her skin was on fire.

When the fire ceased the old fuel still left in the forge had ignited. One by one the furnaces caught light in a bellowing rush of soot and dust, the hum of the fires and the yellow glow of them filled the cavern. Marie risked a glance around the bar just in time to see Smaug look of shock at what he'd done. It did not last very long as he began beating down the gates to get at them.

"Marie!" Thorin called her over. She gladly moved away from the gates and towards the dwarf. He pointed to a pair of statues, dwarves with their hands clasped on the floor and a mill under their chins. Next to the statues was a set of stairs and a large lever. 'Mills? Oh of course! A mill. Water.' Now Marie understood what Thorin intended to do.

"On my mark, pull that lever." He told her and sent her running towards it. It did not take her long to climb the stairs, but once at the top she had to sit and wipe her brow. Her skin was boiling from the heat that filled the cavern. How did the dwarves work in such conditions all the time? And they wore more layers than hobbits. She glanced down at the ground, seeing the dwarves spreading across the forge. Bombur set to work pulling the chain for the bellows, which turned the gold flames blue, as for the others Marie wasn't quite sure what they were doing. She also spotted Thorin place himself in the open where Smaug was sure to see him.

Smaug managed to pull open half of the gate and almost had the other half ripped off its hinges. Marie stood up and readied herself, watching as Smaug gave one more push and had obliterated the last of the door's defence. He skulked over the furnaces, searching. The light of the forges turning his scales bright gold, and his chest glowed brighter still. From her position, Marie was just out of his reach, only just.

As Thorin had planned, Smaug spied him and instantly went for the kill, opening his jaw wide.

"NOW!"

Marie jumped and caught the lever with two hands. Using both force and her weight, it unhitched and came down, releasing the water onto the unsuspecting dragon. It hit him with such force he slipped up off his back legs and was knocked into the side of a furnace. Steam filled the sweltering cavern and Marie could hear a painful fizzing coupled with screeching. The water had doused the dragon fire from within Smaug's chest. Stunned and in pain, Smaug wildly flapped his wings trying to get up, his size was too great to let him do so in a confined area. He reeled back and writhed about like a worm between the furnaces. Marie could hardly make it out with all the smoke.
The water flow eased down and the mill began to turn, setting clogs and gears into motion. The pulleys above jolted sharply before moving across and Marie heard a loud pop from the smelting pots settled on top of the furnaces.

'Just what is in those?' Marie let go of the lever and landed lightly on her feet. Smaug stopped writhing and pulled himself back up. He may have lost his fire for the moment, but as he had boldly claimed before he hand teeth claws and impenetrable armor. His body shook with every ragged breath he took, the sound of it blending perfectly with the whirling of gears and the roar of the forges. Marie felt the marble ground beneath her tremble.

'That can not be a good sign.'

There was a sudden flash of light, accompanied by a loud hiss from Smaug. Then came another, another. Flash bombs. So that's where the dwarves had gone off too, to make those. While Smaug continued to be pelted with the flash bombs, the small doors at the bottoms of the furnaces opened and from them poured a steaming hot gold liquid that flowed down into the grooves along the floor, the lines turning amber and joining up, all heading in the same direction. But where?

The marble moved again and Marie tripped up on her own foot. She rolled onto her stomach and continued to watch the debacle unfurling. Smaug stood up on his back legs and knocked unto the pulleys above. The iron cables tangled themselves around his spikes and the pulleys crashed into his sides. The dragon roared in frustration and swung his frame about, snapping at the pulleys with his teeth and only causing more damage. During his fight with the cables and flash bombs, one of his wings slammed into the frame below the mill. A large crack formed and traveled all the way up the pillar, splitting it in two. Marie scrambled her feet in time as the crack reached the top. In a moment of fight or flight, Marie thought it best to get down from the top of the mill but before she could another loud crash erupted from the right. Smaug's tail had shattered the stone support and the platform began tilting to the side. Marie found herself sliding down the marble at an alarming rate. She yelped and tried to latch onto something to slow down. She grabbed a broken ledge and stopped with sharp jolt. Pieces of stone, marble and wood rushed by her head. The ledge gave way and Marie continued downwards, but at a much slower rate. She landed on her feet but tumbled backwards off the rubble.

She groaned and grabbed the back of her head. Her sight when in and out of darkness and all she could hear was a sharp wringing.

It was so painful.

She looked up and tried to make out what was in front of her. All she could see was dark gold, swirling before her. She blinked and the gold started to take form, snaking back and forth.

The wringing died out and the wall of grinding metal and steam hit her ears.

"Keep going Marie! Run!" Someone called from in the distance.

Her sight improved only for her to see Smaug swing his head round to her, murder alight in his eyes.

Marie rolled onto her other side and took off like hound, the terrible thumping of the dragon's feet close behind her. She ran for a small alcove that hopefully lead out of the forges and was too small for Smaug. She ducked under the open and ran hard and fast, not daring to look back at the noises of the dragon crashing through stone. Marie ran blindly through the dark until she passed into a great chamber illuminated by the captured light of the moon outside.
Marie could not keep going. Everything hurt too much, from her aching feet to her battered head, and every breath felt like a chain wrapped around her chest growing tighter. Her wheezy breath filled the emptiness of the chamber.


The wall above broke and sent pieces flying forward with a great tapestry that had been hanging high along the rafters. Smaug had found her. She tried to limp herself to safety but the gush of wind created by the falling tapestry was so strong the hobbit was knocked clean off her feet.

"YOU!" Smaug growled. Marie remained prone of the floor as the dragon landed in front of her, shaking free of the debris. "You think you can deceive me Barrel Rider?" The hobbit looked through the veil of curls that hid her face. The dragon was poised against a pillar, his large chest expanding and falling like an over worked horse. "I know the secret behind your riddle now. You have come Lake Town." He guessed.

Something changed about Smaug. What was once smugness and grace had turned suspicion and jittery. "Yes. This is some sorted scheme hatched between these filthy dwarves and those miserable tug trading Lake Men. Those sniveling cowards with their long bows and Black Arrows!" Marie could hear paranoia in those words and a deep seeded hate.

He remembered the Black Arrow, and he feared it.

"Perhaps it's about time I paid them a visit." Smaug sneered and turned to leave.

Marie realized what he intended and she felt her voice rising in her throat to stop him. "WAIT!" Marie staggered to her feet and chased after the dragon, "You can not go to Lake Town. They had nothing to do this with!"

Smaug slowed to a stop, his long neck pulling back so that his head was concealed behind the pillars. "You care about them?" His voice echoed about the hall. As Marie drew closer, his head snapped around, his glowing eyes pinning her down. "Good. Then you can watch them all die."

Marie felt like all the wind had been sucked out of her lungs. Had she just condemned hundreds of people to die? All because she had mentioned the barrels? Because she dared to be as clever as dragon? All that death ... because of something she had said?

Leaving her with this fact, Smaug went to complete the terrible task, only to be stopped once more.

"Here! You witless worm!"

The hulking mass of dragon froze at the taunt, and a growl filled the air. Smaug coiled around to face his new priority. "You." He said in a long drawn out tone of loathing. He crawled down the corridor, Marie following in his wake. Her knees were the consistency of jelly and she struggled to keep up. She gave up as she reached the first pillar at the junction and lent against it, watching the dragon approaching a massive set of stones at the end of the chamber, draped in chains and bound in two iron casts. On top of the stones stood a long figure, and anyone with two wits about them would know it to be Thorin. Marie was lucky she was still standing to see him, given that she felt like the world would flip on her any second.
"I am taking back you stole!" Thorin challenged Smaug, who merely laughed a haughty laugh at him.

"You will take nothing. I laid low your warriors of old. I instill terror in the hearts of men." Smaug pulled himself upright saw as to be eye to eye with the dwarf. "I am King Under the Mountain."

"This is not you mountain! These are dwarf lands! This is dwarf gold! And we will have our revenge!" Thorin gave an almighty shout in the dwarvish tongue, an order, and the iron cast around the stones popped open with a 'clunk', letting the stones fall away. As they did, a glimmering gold statue fifty foot tall appeared in the shape of a dwarven warrior, similar in style to the one by the hidden door. So that's what all the gold was for, but Marie could barely see to what purpose it would serve. The sight of the gold did stun Smaug for a moment, the beast humming in awe of the gift. But Marie spotted something not quite right with the statue.

The left side of the face had started to bubble and fester.

Marie's frazzled instincts told her to step back against the wall, which felt and awfully long way back. But as her fingers skimmed the wall, the statue's whole head exploded in a shower of steaming hot gold in Smaug's face. The ripple effect resulted in the statue caving on itself. The dragon tried to back away from the event but the gold as viscous and trapped his back legs. The wave overwhelmed Smaug and he roared and floundered about helplessly as the gold swallowed him up while he fell backwards. The heat hit Marie's skin, making it tingle. A bead of sweat ran her temple as the gold ceased to move and stilled, with Smaug trapped beneath its surface.

Was victory theirs? Had the dragon finally been killed?

Marie heard no joyous cries from the dwarves. Perhaps they too had their uncertainties. They had to be sure. The gold looked to be setting again, but Marie felt every hair on the back of her neck standing on end. She took a tentative step towards to gold, but reeled back as from within its molten depths Smaug emerged, howling in pain as the gold coated him in a brilliant shade that seemed unearthly. Flecks of it came flying towards Marie and she ducked to avoid being hit.

"IT BURNS! IT BURNS!" The dragon screamed as he moved fast down the chamber, trailing moulted gold with his tail. "I'LL SHOW REVENGE!"

'He can't. The town will be ... The children. Bard. Bofur. Oin. Fili. Kili. They'll be ... oh no. Oh no, no, no, no!'

Marie followed the trail of gold, her chest heaving.

'Dragon fire and ruin.'

The sound of stone cracking led Marie to the long forgotten entrance to the city. What once was sealed up to the rest of the world now was splinted and opened. Traces of gold along the edge proved this to be Smaug's work.

'Ash and desolation.'

Marie climbed up one of the boulders that had fallen from the gate, her eyes searching the sky frantically. It was not hard to spot Smaug. A great flurry of his wings and the gold fell from his rising body like dust in the wind. The beating of his wings carried on the air as he flew away from the mountain, down into the valley of Esgaroth.
Marie collapsed to her knees.

It was too late.

Too late.

"What have we done?"
Parting Ways

Chapter Notes

Fluffy filler with a pinch of angst

The air was sweet with Autumn. Crisp and fresh, carrying with it leaves that fell to the ground like dancers dressed in skirts of amber and oak. Or so Marie's ageing mind thought as she stood on a pavilion looking out onto the grand circle of Rivendell, where the elves had greeted to dignitaries of the men, dwarves and elves from across the Free Lands of Middle Earth not days ago. Now they would bid farewell to the same representatives and also the nine members of the Fellowship.

Guardians and companions to the Ring Barer.

Her dear Frodo.

Marie would never forgive herself for giving her nephew such a burden. It should have been her's to bare, she found the ring after all. But then again she had been unwittingly corrupted by its influence for sixty years. Now it would poison Frodo.
Marie thumped the cane into the ground. She would not allow herself to think such things. Frodo would not fall as she did. He was younger, stronger.

'You have been wrong before.'

The old hobbit shook her head. She hated that persistent voice, for always held a grain of truth.

Putting that behind her, Marie observed those who had come to the circle early. It was mostly those who were curious about such a group that would venture out into the Wilds. Frodo had recounted the events of the council the day before. How when he stepped forward before the arguing crowd, Gandalf the Grey had vowed to guide him to the land of Mordor, and the mortal men Aragorn son of Arathorn, Boromir of Gondor, the Dwarf Gilmi, the Elf Legolas, and the hobbits Sam, Merry and Pippin came forward to protect him.

Such grand propriety hid the ever present danger of the task and the Fellowship was to be sent off as heroes of the Free Folk.

Marie was quite amazed just how many volunteered for the task, but glad of it. Frodo would not be alone his quest.

It would be hard to say goodbye to him, knowing that it could well be her last.

A party of silver bearded dwarves came into sight, keeping clear of the prying eyes of the elves. One dwarf in particular caught Marie's attention. She smiled. He may have lost the red in his hair, but she'd recognise those beads in his beard anywhere.
She made her way down from the pavilion, slowly due her ailing limbs, and walked towards the dwarves. She could hear them grumbling in the native tongue, some of which Marie could finally understand.

"Aye a poor excuse for a meal it was." Gloin grunted, his voice had grown harsher over the years, "Not a skint of meat to be found. Just like the last time."
"At least they offered food again and not insult."

The group turned at the newcomer as she tottered towards them. A strange little woman in a blue shawl and wielding a cane. Gloin's face squinted for a moment before the recognition dawned on him. The mess of curls and green glimmer in her eyes gave her away.

"Bless my beard." He said, "Could it be, after all these years?" He chuckled and threw open his arms, "Mistress Baggins. Well met, well met indeed."

Marie embraced her friend, patting his back as he crushed her tightly into his chest. "Nye on sixty years since last I laid eyes on ya." He drew away and took a good look at her.

"It's good to see you too Gloin." She said patting his hand.

The other dwarves left the old companions to the reunion. Gloin placed the hobbit's arm in his and together they walked closer to the circle. "Such strange time that we should met again don't you think?" He asked, indicating to the courtyard of Rivendell.

"Fate is a funny thing Gloin. Perhaps it is fitting that the veterans of a quest are here to witness the beginning of another. I understand you son is among the nine." Marie said.

"Oh aye." Gloin puffed out his chest with pride. "My wee lad is here. The image of me in my prime. Oh his mother will be so proud."

'Or worried sick.'

"Tell me how goes Erebor? Is it as grand as you'd hoped it would be?"

"And more my dear. There is never a moment where the fires die out. There is music in the halls, the people craft the finest of wares. Oh it is everything that is meant to be."

Marie could very well see it.

"You must come. We have enough provisions for one more and you would have the finest welcome in all of Middle Earth. Bofur and others would be more than pleased to see you again."

"If only it were that easy for me to travel so freely Gloin. I may not be long for this world."

Gloin looked down at the hobbit in surprise. "You can not be sure of that lass."

Marie sighed, "Oh but I can be. I may have lived to a ripe old age but I'm not getting any younger or stronger. Besides, I have a vow to forfill."

At that moment the company had arrived in the courtyard, lead by the Ranger. Samwell had a set of reigns in hand and pulled along a stout pony. The elf Legolas crossed the circle in seconds and talked with the Ranger. Gloin growled at the sight of the elf. "Not too keen for that bloody prince being near Gimli. Called him a goblin mutant he did."

"Careful with your choice of words my friend." Marie warned him gently.

Yes she remembered the fair haired archer well. Whether he remembered her was an entirely different story all together.

The next to arrive were the duo Merry and Pippin walking with Gimli and the man from Gondor behind them. Gimli was very much like his father, baring his axes and battle helmet with honour.
Then came the wizard and Frodo. Gandalf glanced over and caught Marie's gaze. He waved her over.

There was hesitation in her step as she slid her arm out from Gloin's. Her free hand clutched the shawl around her tightly, the nerves making her tremble.

A fine example he was setting for the four young hobbits.

Ever the observant wizard, Gandalf saw her state and place a hand on her shoulder. "From one Ring Barer to another, you would give him great comfort." He spoke in a soft voice and for a moment Marie's trembling hand was still. He always knew how to make her worries fade.

Frodo was standing at Sam's side, but he still managed to appear distant and alone. A travelling cloak was clasped around his shoulders and Sting hung awkwardly off his hip. Before she had given him the blade, Marie had whispered a silent prayer over it to protect her nephew as it had done so for her. Frodo saw her approach and his blue eyes brightened a little. He held out a hand for her. Marie took note of the warmth of his skin, an improvement from his ill term when he had arrived.

"Let me look at you my boy." She said, fixing the lapels of his coat and dusting off his shoulders. On any other day Frodo would tell her to stop fussing, embarrassed to be coddled like a child. But he said nothing, but sheepishly grinned and let his aunt do as she pleased. As she fixed his shirt, she felt a little bump in the material. A fine pattern of chain mail. Mithril.

"Good lad. You remembered." Marie whispered.

Frodo nodded.

"There is not much I can say that I have already taught you. Only this. Trust your companions Frodo, for in the end they will be the ones you can depend upon."

"I can not say I am without my fears Aunt Marie." Frodo said. Marie placed a hand on his cheek. "But still I must try to complete this task."

"Courage comes in all forms Frodo. You will find your's."

"Can you say that I will come back?"

Marie felt at lump swell in her throat. "I ... can not foresee such things, nor can I make any promises that you will. All we can do is hope." She drew him into an embrace and held him tightly. Her precious boy, and she would never see him again.

She tried not to cry, but she felt the stinging of tears in her eyes.

Marie held him for a good few minutes before letting go. By then the three other youths had come closer, hoping for any scraps of wisdom she could impart upon them. "Now for you three rascals." She said to them, still holding Frodo's hand. "If you remember anything from my stories you'll find the answers you seek. The lessons of the past do help with the lessons of the preset. Be wise, be vigilant. And try not to cause too much trouble." She directed this to the Brandybuck and the Took. "All I can do I wish you safe travels. And warn you, you will not be the same hobbits as you are now."

"Aye Miss Marie." Merry said. Pippin nodded in agreement with his cousin but Sam still had a look of uncertainty. Poor lad had never been so far out of his element.
May all the luck in the world go with him, with all of them.

"Now, my dear hobbits. It's about time we move on." Gandalf told them. Marie saw why as Lord Elrond entered the courtyard. A hush came over the elves and they took their places around the Fellowship. Marie did not want let go of Frodo yet, but the wizard had spoke and she let him slip though her fingers, watching him walk away to join the other members of his company. Gandalf knelt down and gripped Marie's shoulder.

"Take heart Marie. I will guide him with the best of my abilities."

"You do that Gandalf." She looked him in the eye as she placed her hand over his, "You promise me that you will look after him. Promise me."

"I promise."

Marie let out a shaky breath. "Thank you."

Gandalf move his hand to place his long arm around her. His great scraggly beard tickled her cheek. "This will be our last meeting my old friend." She muttered. Gandalf pulled back and looked her with large grey eyes. He saw in her's the truth of her words and grew sad. "Keep watching over him when I can not."

"My dear Marie." Gandalf tilted her head and kissed her hair. "Farewell."

Marie closed her eyes and breathed in the smell of Old Toby as the wizard stood up.

There were so many farewells to be done, so much still to be completed. A great longing bloomed in her chest and she began twisting the iron ring around her finger slowly. She still hadn't said what needed be said, and she may be too late. Or not.

"Mithrandir." Lord Elrond said, swiping his arm out in an elegant manner. "By your leave."

"Yes yes, of course." Gandalf's long cloak swept up the leaves at Marie's feet as he went to join the Fellowship. Marie chose the option to return to Gloin side. The old dwarf was still waiting for her patiently as she made her way back, taking her arm again when her saw her struggling.

"The wee lad with the dark hair." He inquired, "That one your's?"

Marie was looking at the lad in question as he stepped forward to Lord Elrond.

"Aye, my nephew. But as good as any son one could wish for."

The Lord of Rivendell spoke to the Fellowship, bestowing upon the blessings of the Elves and to go with the grace of all Free Folk.

As he spoke, Marie whispered to her old friend, "You know Gloin, about your offer."

~*~

Marie remembered her first encounter with her nephew.

During the late Spring the respectable Baggins family would have an afternoon tea by the Green
Dragon. Sometimes members of other families were invited if they were seen fit to. Of course Marie wasn't entirely so respectable but none the less she attended when invited. She was content sitting with the much older, quieter members of the family and let the younger generation socialize and enjoy themselves.

The children ran about the edges of the party, engaged in a game of tag. Marie had been watching them scatter about in search of a hiding spots when she felt something move from under the bench she was sitting at. At first she dismissed it as one of her old cousins adjusting their feet. But they were at the other end of the table. With a quizzical look, she shifted her legs and pulled back her skirts.

It was a boy. A dark haired, pale, bright blue eyed boy.

He looked up at her with those wide eyes, drinking in the sight of her as if she had sprouted another head.

Marie stared back, a little perplexed as to what he was doing under there until it dawned on her. The sounds of competitive children grew louder as they came up from the lake. The boy said nothing, but in his eyes he pleaded with her not to give him away. She smiled and let her skirts fall back into place, acting as a curtain.

Four other boys passed by, calling out furiously before continuing onward to the behind the Green Dragon. Marie knocked on the table, "They're gone, cost is clear." He crawled out from behind her skirts, his white shirt covered in dirt. He dusted himself off furiously to look presentable, making Marie chuckle. "And guessing from the ruckus that lot just made, you would be Frodo I take it."

"Yes ma'am. Frodo Baggins."

"What a fine name. Marie Baggins of Bag end at your service."

The boy blinked and looked up and down at her. He must have heard her name before, and most likely not in a positive context. Those were the days when the whispers of 'Mad Baggins' started and went around quicker than a food platter.

"Are ...?" Frodo cut himself of and clasped his hands behind his back. A natural thing for a nervous child to do.

"Don't be afraid. What is it my dear boy?"

"My da says that you have been over the mountains. Is that ... true?"

"Oh yes, over the mountains and beyond the Great Woodland realm in the east."

"Where the Elves are?"

"Oh aye. There are Elves in the east, as there are here in the west. Why beyond the borders of the Shire and further still from Bree, the Elves dwell in the ancient Homely House of Rivendell."

There was something about the mentioning of Elves that sparked the boy's interest. He smiled, tilting him face down so that his chin sat on his collar bone.

"Would you like to know a secret Frodo?" She asked. The boy nodded and listened to the old hobbit's instructions on finding the best hiding spot. With a bow and a wave the young hobbit, Frodo Baggins, was off and away. Marie felt the oddest sensation of familiarity spreading in her
Those blue eyes reminded her of the past.

It was later when she learnt that the boy's father was her distant cousin Drogo Baggins, whom Marie remembered had married one of the Brandybuck girls.

A Baggins and a Brandybuck. A combination fit to rival that of a Baggins and a Took. No wonder Marie had taken such a quick shining to him.

That was why when the news of Drogo and Primula Baggins' death reached Hobbiton a year later, Marie's heart went out to the poor child left behind. She felt even more distress when in the following months since Frodo was taken in by his uncle she heard news of his troubling behaviour. She didn't know what exactly possessed her to take a trip to Buckland to visit the boy, but as soon as she saw the sullen look and the loss of the cheer in his smile she knew she couldn't leave him alone.

She had a large enough home, no children of her own and the Brandybucks already had many to care for. There was no reason why she shouldn't have been able to take him in.

It took a lot of convincing, but Rorimac Brandybuck gave his consent for Marie to take Frodo to Bag End where she would raise him as his aunt.

And raise him she did.

Frodo thrived in Hobbiton and under Marie's guidance gained a fascination for the world. She taught him good manners, but encouraged a little mischief every now and again, and a many number of other things, such as the reading of maps and the language of the Elves. She grew to love Frodo as if he was her own. And perhaps in another lifetime, with his dark curls and blue eyes that reminded her so much of him, he could have been.

~*~

Marie had placed her quill in the pot when there came a knock at her door. "Come in." She called and turned in her seat. She wasn't surprised to see that her visitor was Lord Elrond. He still wore his crimson robes from that morning but lacked the circle worn for decorum.

"Such a hasty decision made I thought I may have missed your departure." He said, his expression gentle and knowing of her intentions.

"You know I wouldn't leave without a goodbye Lord Elrond." Marie told him. She picked up the paper on the writing desk and folded it in two carefully. "And there is a reason for my leaving I can assure you."

"The Lonely Mountain."

"Aye." Marie placed he paper on her lap. "Master Gloin has kindly let me join their caravan back to Erebor, he did instigated the offer and it would be nice to see my old friends."

"Is that wise, with your condition?"
Marie ran a finger along the folded note. "If I don't do it now, there may not be a chance of me ever." She glanced up at the elf, "I have to see if it is how he envisioned it, with my own eyes." Elrond nodded. He did not need to question her further, he knew her well. Marie took the folded note and placed it in an elegant envelope, addressed to 'Frodo Baggins'.

"I left most on my affairs in order when I the Shire, as for here there is little I will be needing." She said with a groan as she went to stand up from the stool.

"You will be missed." Elrond offered a hand to her. He helped her to the large bed where her travel bag lay out half packed, her cane leaning against the bedside. Only few cloths and minor possessions would suffice. "You will not take your book?"

"There is no need. I've finished it." Marie said proudly, running her finger tips across the red leather where the silver pressed initials were. 'MB'. "Besides, I've told all my tales, penned my adventures. This last one is for myself and myself alone."

The elf on the edge of the bed and crossed his hands before him, "And you did not disclose these plans with your nephew I take it."

Marie placed the envelope on top of the book and packed the last of her clothes. "I've already done a terrible wrong against that boy. I would not add more to his burden."

"You had no understanding of the nature of that ring Mariellena, you are hardly to blame for what has come to pass."

"All the same Frodo must now bare it and its power." Marie frowned and shook her head, "I should have known better."

"Perhaps." Elrond said, "Oh perhaps Frodo was fated from the beginning to take the ring the Mordor, and you were always meant to find it. It did serve you well during your adventure east did it not?"

Marie knew she could not win against him. "Still, it corrupted me in the end."

"Not entirely." Elrond took her hand between his, "You parted with it, that is a feat in an of itself."

"It wasn't without difficulty." Marie admitted. She glanced at the book and the letter. "I have but one favour to ask my Lord before leave."

"Ask and it shall be done."

She slid her hand out from his and picked up the letter carefully. "I realise the likelihood of it is very slight, but should my Frodo return to Rivendell, would you see that he receives this ... and my book."

Elrond took the letter between his fingers. "A final letter of farewell I take it."

"An apology more like it, and few answers."

"Answers?"

Marie smiled fondly, "A child has many questions, and there were a few I never felt ready to answer. Until now."

The elf nodded, "I will see to it that this letter finds its place in his hands."
"Thank you. I can only hope that he will understand."
'Dragon fire and ruin.'

'ASH AND DESOLATION.'

The wind carried flecks of gold across the frosted terrain and the terrible beating of dragon's wings. Marie could hear it, each stoke reverberating through the air. It was all she could hear. The moment her knees and palms hit the ground the rest of the world had gone silent. Her small hands curled into fists, broken nails cutting into the loose earth. She remained there, still as stone as she watched utterly helpless as Smaug flew down to the unsuspecting Lake Town.

And they were to blame.

She was to blame.

How he had screamed after freeing himself from the molted gold, crying out his vengeance upon them all. It made her ears bleed.

Marie didn't feel the hand pressed to her shoulder until she noticed herself rocking her back and forth slowly. She gasped and looked up at the owner of the hand. Balin was there, his face flushed with concern as he called her name in hopes of a response.

"Lass? Are you injured?"

Marie pulled back to sit in her heels. It was then she saw the other dwarves scurrying past to see the dragon. "I … I just … tripped. Smaug he …"

"I know lass I know." Balin took her by the hand and helped her to her feet. "We have unleashed a beast."

That Marie had not problem agreeing with. Balin steadied her with his firm hand. "Ravenhill." He said loudly. Gloin, Dori and Nori looked back. "The old watch tower." Balin nodded towards the waterfall where two ruins where placed either side of the river. "We will be able to see the lake from there."

'AND WATCH THE TOWN BURN.' Marie added on in her mind.

The company or what was left of it headed up hill towards the watch tower, with Dwalin and Nori taking point as they scaled the steep slow as fast as they could. Marie's body worked against her mind and she felt herself falling back from the rest. Bombur helped when he could as he for the most part brought up the rear. But not this time.

With every glance over her shoulder she noticed Thorin lagging further behind. His steps where slow and he seemed to be watching his feet. Was he feeling the strain from the fight down the forges?

But Thorin never showed how tired he was. Never.

The reached the top of the hill and climbed out onto a tower that had long since crumble into nothing more than a base, one of many.
"Just what is this place?" She asked inquisitively, seeing that the building seemed divided in two with the river frozen between them.

"Once it served as a minor fort to keep an eye on the west and north, and to watch the river in the event of flooding." Balin explained.

"Was it Dale's or Erebor's."

"A little of both, one built on top of the other. Those were the days when dwarves and men lived in peace."

From there Marie had a clear view of Dale and further down the valley she could spot Lake Town, much to her dismay. She watched the dark silhouette of Smaug dance across the sky, dipping low to just graze over the town. But there were no fires, not yet. The dragon was proud and took his time taunting, like a cat would taunt a mouse. Marie knew from being the mouse and the anticipation of the inevitable twisted inside her like a dagger. It didn't take long for that feeling to triple when she spotted the telltale glow of Smaug's chest as he dove down once again. Gold fire light up the dark lake and the bells rang out.

Marie could feel the memory of the flame's heat on her skin.

"What now?" Came the meek voice of Ori, "What do we do?"

"There is nothing we can do." Dwalin shook his head. "We could barely fight him in the confines of the mountain, fighting him in the open would be futile."

"But Bofur, Fili and the others …" Ori's voice trailed off.

"Let us hope that they, and all the people, can make it out." Balin took his place next to Dwalin. Ori sat down helplessly but had his own brothers at his side to comfort him.

Dwalin was right. What hope would any normal weapon have of bringing Smaug down? They had none and no magic that could stand against him. Why wasn't Gandalf there with them? He would know what can be done. He said he would come.

Marie grabbed her arms tightly. "Please be alright." She whispered. To the boys, Bofur, Oin, Bard and his children.

"He is taking his time." Dwalin said. "He could set the whole town alight with one or two breathes but he doesn't."

"This is his revenge." Marie grimly stated. "He will draw this out for as long as he can so that everyone suffers."

Balin sighed. "Poor souls."

Another blast of fire lined the outskirts of Lake Town and Marie had to look away. She could see Gloin, Bombur and Bifur from under her eyelashes, but Thorin was nowhere to be seen. Marie walked back to hill's edge while everyone else was focused on the dragon. She glanced around a standing stone and found Thorin on the steps of the tower.

He was looking back on the gates of Erebor, still as the mountain itself.

This to Marie seemed strange. At least that was her gut feelings were telling her. She stepped back
from the standing stone.

"I think the serpent is gone."

"No he landed."

"Can you be sure?"

Black smoke rose from the burning town and it became harder to see just where Smaug was. Marie squinted to find the dragon, but the smoke was too thick to defer red scales from flames.

'What is he doing?'

"Look!" Balin said loudly and Marie's eyes immediately went in search for what he referred to. Out of the burning wreak the was an explosion of wood and water followed by Smaug crashing through it all. A hair raising roar echoed up to the mountain as he flapped wildly to gain height. All grace was gone, only desperation.

"By Durin's beard he's going to dive bomb the town." Gloin exclaimed.

"No." Marie shook her head. The dragon flew higher and higher up to sky clawing to very air until he stopped. His wings slacked and back he went, falling.

He disappeared into the thick smoke for a moment but there was an almighty crash like thunder.

"Did you see that?" Marie hurried to the edge of the tower. "Did you ...? He fell."

"You sure?" Behind her the dwarves stood and congregated about the edge to see for themselves.

"Yes. He fell." Marie said it again. "He's not getting back up. He's …. dead."

It had to be that. They heard no more of the dragon's shrieks, his roars, not even the sound of his wings. Had he been shot down? With what? The only thing that could bring down a dragon was …

'A Black Arrow.'

Marie immediately thought of Bard.

She looked back to the company. "Smaug is dead."

"She's right. Look." Gloin pointed to the sky. Dozens of small figures flocked from all corners of the horizon, cawing to one another. "The ravens are returning. Just as the portence told." The ravens flew passed the tower and straight to the mountain.

"Aye, tis true then." Balin had a smile on his face as wide as the river. "News will spread across the land and soon all will know. The dragon is dead."

The signs of dawn began to show hues of pink broke through the smoke. The beginning of the Dwarves' New Year was welcomed by slight cheers of dwarves and the death of the Bane of Durin's folk. Yes Smaug was dead and yet Marie did not feel that it was over. Doubt hovered overhead like a black cloud and did not look to be fading. If was like when Marie felt a storm approaching before she saw any signs of one.

She waited for Balin to finish his dwarves embrace with his brother before moving closer to his side. The dwarf took notice of her hovering very quickly. "What is it lass?"

Marie looked out at the black smoke over the lake. "So what now? What is left for us?"
Balin gave a slight head tilt and keep his eyes low. "We carry on. The mountain is ours again." He may have gone on to talk of finding the stores within the mountain and the possibility of fresh cloths but Marie could not be sure. The dwarves started to move back towards the mountain and Marie idly moved with them without really know she did. Her thoughts were scattered from the Erebor to Esgaroth with questions.

Had Bard really brought down the dragon? If so how did he procure a Black Arrow or did he always had it in plain sight? Did he survive? Did her fellow companions? Would they venture back to the lake to find them?

It was turbulent how her mind reeled from question to question. It tired her. Another unsolved puzzle troubled her a little more than the others. She rounded the standing stone with Balin and expected to see him where she had left him. But he was gone.

"Where is Thorin?"

Chapter End Notes

The final trailer for this story here so enjoy
Something broke.

It cluttered across stone and had alerted Marie from deep within her sleeping state. There were no other noises that gave cause to worry or to rush so Marie began the task of unwinding herself from her blanket.

"Funny," She grumbled while spitting out a curl she must have chewed in her sleep. When had she gone to bed? She thought back on the last thing she remembered. After Ravenhill they had returned to the mountain, and they were all very tired. They found a small guards room, and some of the stores. Beds were given out but that's all that Marie could recall. One of the dwarves must have led her to her cot and tucked her in.

A kind gesture, but whoever tucked her in did so tightly Marie had to fight her way out. She sat up in the cot and noticed that a garment had been laid across her legs. Marie slipped her leg out and sat at the edge of the cot and rubbed her heavy eyelids. When they focused better Marie saw it was a dress made from thick purple wool and lined with soft leather that looked just about her height but far too wide in the waist.

Through the door to the alcove the beds had been set up in the hobbit caught movement and thought to investigate. Slowly she stood and moved to the doorway into the guard's room. It was empty save Bombur who was busy picking up pieces of a broken bowel off the floor.

So that's what made that noise. "Everything alright?"

The dwarf shot upright with a guilty look and a handful of shattered clay. "I didn't mean to wake you Miss Marie, honestly."

Marie shook her hand, "No point fretting." She fought off a yawn. "I was just about to wake up anyway."

Bombur huffed out a breath and appeared to be more relaxed. He was dressed in a coat more suited to him that the oversized cloths from Lake Town. "Just let me clean this up and I'll get you some food." For a man, or dwarf, of his size he was quick on his feet. Marie chose a spot at the table where small piles of plates and cups had been left. Before to long a nice hot serving of stew was placed in front of her, the smell caused her stomach to growl.

"Thank you Bombur."

"How are you faring now Miss Marie?"

"Better." She cooled the stew on her spoon then ate it in one go. "Where are the others?"

"Down in the hall with the treasure." He sat down beside her.

"What are they doing there?"

"Thorin has got us scouring through the gold for the Arkenstone. I'm actually on a break now." Bombur shook his head, "He is very insistent we find it. Mind you being that it's the King's Jewel he does need it to claim the loyalty of the seven clans."

Bombur failed to see Marie quicken the pace at which she ate the stew. "So … ugh!" She coughed
as her food got stuck in her throat. "Excuse me. So there is still no sign of Bofur and the others?"

"No. Nothing." Bumbur clasped his hands together and squeezed. He was clearly worried for his brother. Marie felt terrible for changing the subject. "Not yet." She offered to ease his fears.

"Not yet." He repeated. "Best tuck in while that is still hot Miss Marie." Bombur released his hands and slapped them on the table, sending cumbles up into the air. "I should finish cleaning this without dropping more bowels."

Marie smiled and took his advice. The food wasn't the finest, but it was still good. She finished the whole thing by the time Bombur had cleared the table.

"Oy Bombur."

Marie looked back over her shoulder as Nori sauntered into the room. He too wore new cloths, only he had chainmail over his chest.

"Oh. At last the sleepy beauty rises." He nodded to Marie. "News from Thorin. He wants you back down there."

"Already?"

"Course he does. 'Ever man must keep looking.' His words, not mine." Nori shrugged. "He seems a bit high strung. Has been all day."

"All day." Marie pushed her empty bowel away. "How long have I been asleep?"

Nori hooked his thumbs into his belt. "Sun is 'bout to go down last I checked."

"And you let me sleep all day?!" A mortified Marie stood up and bumped her knees into the table. Nori sniggered at her silly action. "Hey, we all agreed if anyone needed the rest it was you lass. You were up all night being chased by a dragon."

"Oh … I see."

"Anyway, come on Bombur. Work is waiting." Nori spun on his heels and headed back out the way he came.

"Hold on Nori." Marie called after him. "I'll come along."

The two dwarves had no issue with their burglar joining them, in fact they looked pleased to see her up and walking perfectly in the wake of such a dangerous night. The three climbed down the many stairs, some Marie recognized and made note of in case she found herself lost again.

"I take it you are having no luck in the search." She asked as they drew closer to where the treasure hord must have been, or at least where it began.

"Not for the Arkenstone, but the treasures we have found," Nori whistled loudly, "Some of it could very well be forged by craftsmen during the age of the Seven."

"While I was searching I noticed several artifacts that were not dwarven."

"Tributes from other kingdoms maybe." Bombur said.

"And what will you do with these 'tributes'?”
Nori shrugged. "That will be for the king to decide."

'King? Who is …? …Oh.' Maire had all but forgotten that all this time Thorin was indeed a prince, or a king now. A fact that only widened the distance between the two of them.

From bellow the stairs an ire light illuminated the walls and the gentle echoes of voices found their way up to Marie's ears. Down more and more stairs they went until Nori gently tugged Marie through a door and told Bombur to keep heading down. The hobbit was lead across a walkway towards a sort of observational balcony, bellow the walkway was the treasure, or at least a small fraction of it.

"Balin. Brought along a visitor." Nori called to the balcony. Marie saw the elder dwarf poaring over a table. One could only surmise that the dark outline behind him would be Thorin. When Nori called out only Balin took noticed.

"Ah, Miss Marie." He stood upright and rounded the table, "Glad to see you looking a little pinker than when we put you to bed." Nori gave Maire a little push before heading off back across the walkway.

"Glad to be … pinker." The hobbit sheepishly grinned as Balin took took her hand. "I wanted to see if I could be of use, rather that sleep my life away."

"You want to help?" Thorin turned to face them, but the ferocity at which he did made both Marie and Balin flinch. "You can start by telling us where you already looked for Arkenstone." He took a step towards the table and moved a small block across a yellow parchment held down at its four corners. On closer inspection Marie saw it was a type of floor plan for this part of the city no doubt. Thorin pointed to a spot on the map, "Here is where the secret door led to. How far in did you get to?"

Marie sucked in a sharp breath and stared at the paper. "Best guess …." She indicated with her own finger, "Somewhere around here is where I encountered Smaug, but I'm sure I ….."

"I'll have the area checked again." Thorin grumbled.

Marie stepped back from the table, keeping an eye on the new King. He was leaning over the map, a curtain of black and silver hair hid his face from the world. "Do you … want me to help look?"

He said nothing in response

She heard Balin clear his throat behind her. "The rest of the men are already in search, perhaps Miss Marie could take this time to fully recover."

Thorin stood up and went back to the balcony rail. "Do what you wish." He said.

"Alright." Marie muttered, feeling dejected. There was more she wanted to say. Are you alright? How are the men? Have you slept? But somehow none of this made it to her lips.

"Perhaps I can show you the gem stores. Gloin is hard at work sorting through the mess and putting everything to rights." Balin said. "Then we will see about getting you cleaned up." The two of them made it to the other side before Marie stopped him.

"Balin? Is …?" The hobbit glance back nervously, "Is everything … alright?"

"Lass, if I am honest I really can not say. He can be stubborn when he sets his mind to something but this …" Balin gave a little headshake, his curled white beard moving as he did. "This meticulous streak is not in his nature."
He was worried, Marie could see it written all over his face. "I can make my own way about, if you would rather stay here with him."

The elder dwarf didn't say anything, but Marie understood him through his relieved expression. He was grateful and gave her a respectful nodded before heading back to the observational balcony. Marie took one last glance past Balin at Thorin before slipping into the passage way.

"Anything!" He called down to the small figures of the dwarves continued to move across the piles of gold calling back, 'Nothing here!' and 'Not yet!' "Keep looking! No one rests until it is found!"

Marie sped up her pace as if to escape the sound of Thorin's voice. A difficult task since his voice echoed off the walls. She walked, and walked, and walked. Her direction was aimless as she gathered her thoughts. Thorin was not himself, not since they entered the mountain. But she had heard him, his gentle words with Balin as they remembered their home. He only changed when .... he saw the gold. Marie's shoulders shuddered and she grabbed her arms to steady herself.

'Don't think of that. Focus on something else.'

So she instead looked at the walls as she passed them. There were lines upon lines of runes etched into the designs, something Marie hadn't quite noticed were first she walked the passages. She wondered perhaps if they told stories of ancient heroes and reached out to touch the cool stone. Fingertips glided over the letters, gently nicking the skin as she walked.

Marie mused if in the past a young dwarf maiden walked the same path she did. Such thoughts quickly faded when her fingers came across something slick on the wall. She pulled her hand back sharply and examined it. Her fingers were black.

Soot.

It covered the wall, like black paint taken and splashed across green stone. This place was vaguely familiar now that she looked more closely. Chills crawled across her skin as she came to a corner. She half expected a dragon to be waiting with open jaws for her.

Marie peeked around the wall only to find more gold and no dragon. She breathed a sigh of relief and cleaned her fingers on her jacket. Now she was certain of this place. This was where Smaug had chased her to before she gave him the slip. But that also meant ....

None of the dwarves were in sight but within earshot. Marie hurried along and kept her eyes to the ground. It had to be around here still, hidden under the coins the dragon had kicked up. She passed a chest, one she remembered.

"Right, so if I hit the chest." She muttered to herself, "I stood up here and …"She looked down to her right. Little more than five feet from her there was a large pile of coins that wasn't there before. Marie knelt next to it and parted the coins and there, nestled in the gold was the Arkenstone. Marie let out a breathless laugh.

Finally.

She picked it up with both hands like it was a newborn child.

Thorin would be ....

He would be thrilled yes, thrilled was the word.
It was so beautiful. Smooth to the touch and glowing brightly against her skin. Marie swore she could hear it singing to her. A hundred tiny glass bells chiming together as they called out, the light within dancing with it. It was lovely to hear, until the hissing began.

Hisses … and growls.

'I am almost tempted to let you take it,'

The little hobbit's hands trembled as memories flooded her body. She looked over her shoulder and a vision of Smaug hovered in the same place between the stairs, his golden gaze pinning her as if he were real.

'If only to see Oakenshield suffer. Yes, a delightful sight for you to witness once you'd given to him.'

Marie's heart sped up, thrashing against her ribs.

'Watch it destroy him.'

"No I will not ..."

'Watch it corrupt his heart and drive him mad.'

"Stop it!" Marie hissed between her teeth and practical threw the jewel back into the gold pile before her. The vision disappeared and the sound of the bells faded. She clasped her hands across her eyes. "I will not believe your lies you big old lizard with wings. That's all they are, lies."

Lies, or perhaps warnings.

Would giving this to Thorin return him to normal? Or make him worse? Marie had no idea what was happening to him and that frightened her. She looted through the chest and found an old flag which she promptly tore in two. If it would keep her from having another flashback it would do. Using the square piece of fabric she picked up the Arkenstone, wrapped it up tightly and placed it safely in her jacket's inside pocket.

She would wait, for the time to be right that is to return it. Or at least think on it.
The Company Completed

Three days.

It was only three days since the death of Smaug and yet it had felt as if three life times had passed. Thorin had not stopped looking for the Arkenstone, in fact he rarely came away from the treasure horde and had food brought to him. That very day Marie had not seen him at all.

The others were beginning to see it, the change in him, though none would dare say anything out loud about it. It was like an unspoken agreement between them all, that if they say nothing of it then it wasn't true. They just carried on with their assigned duties of night watch, scavenging and cleaning up the rooms of Erebor. Their quarters had scrubbed up well and Marie was able to treat herself with the simple luxury of a bath. She soaked herself until she was red and pruned all over.

But even so, it had not brought her the comfort she wanted.

While she had stewed in the marble tub watching the steam rise she internally debate with the many facets of her conscious.

Thorin wanted the Arkenstone more than anything, and she had it, wrapped up out of sight. All she had to do was to give it to him, she wanted to and yet at the same time she didn't. The debate had not yet reached a verdict even when she dried herself off, redressed in her traveling clothes and sat at the guard table with Ori, Dori and Balin sitting with her.

The Akenstone weighed heavily in her pocket.

"…. dress Miss Marie?"

"Mmm? Whatwhohuh?"

Now that was embarrassing. Marie cleared her throat and pulled her elbows off the table.

Dori watched her reaction with a perplexed look. "You're not wearing the dress Miss Marie?" He repeated. "I don't know if it was your colour or not but .."

"Oh, that. No it is nice but might be a little big on me Dori." All those skirts, the heavy brocade of the sleeves, how would she move in such a thing? Hobbits were not meant to wear such finery. She picked the fur on her cuff, "And besides, I am comfortable in what I have now. Thank you for the thought."

While the dwarves went back to their chatter, Marie faded back into her thoughts with a small frown. In time she slipped away from the table unnoticed, something she had become very good at without really trying anymore.

Marie found a quiet spot to sit. It still amazed her that she could easily see through the passages and tunnels of the mountain without there being that many torches around. Whatever sunlight that crept in lit up almost every corner. Almost

Assured she would not be found, Marie pulled out the Arkenstone. She peeled back the fabric, exposing the brilliant jewel. Again Marie felt the hypnotic enticement tingling on her skin. Something about it was alluring to the eye and it would be easy to fall victim to its charm. What if Marie gave it to him and he shut everything out? Shut her out? Or would he forever grateful to her for finding it? Promise her anything she desire? A part of her wanted that, more than anything.
She had almost given it to Thorin, well she tried.

Five times.

Each time she had it ready in her closed fist as she walked towards him. But the instant he would he turn at her calling and stare her down her resolved dwindled and her hand would hide within her sleeve, concealing the Arkenstone. When Thorin questioned her, she would meekly respond with a 'Hello' or 'How are you?' or eve just a meek half smile. This softened him for a moment and Marie could see a glimpse of the dwarf she had grown to care for.

It hurt her not to give him what he sought. She sighed and wrapped up the jewel again.

"Hullo!?"

Marie's head snapped up as the soft echo drifted up from somewhere in the mountain. Had it been one of the dwarves in search for their burglar she would have been happy to be silent and let them pass to allow her some solace, but there was a distinctive lilt to the voice that made it impossible to be anyone other than ...

"Bofur?"

The hobbit stood and shoved the Arkenstone back into her pocket as she rushed out into the open.

"Hullo!? Bombur?! Anyone!?"

"Anyone?!"

That was Fili.

'Ooh sweet heavens. They're alive.' Marie did her best follow the sounds of their voices.

She spotted four figures passing the stairs she had turned into and heading away from her,

"Wait!" She called out and picked up her pace. She was careful since there was no stopping should she trip. Thankfully the four stopped and reversed course.

"Lass?" Bofur was last in line but first to reach her, catching her as she descended the last few steps. "Oh lass thank the stars you're alive." His arms wrapped around her middle and lifted her clean off her feet.

"Oof! Yes Bofur." He placed her back on solid ground and she was swamped with questions. "Please, one at a time."

Kili nudged past Bofur and Oin, "Where are the others? Is Uncle …?"

Whatever the rest of the question was, Marie didn't hear it as her insides clenched suddenly.

"About that." She muttered. "You may want to rethink …."

"What? What's wrong lass?" Bofur looked ready for the worse.

"It's nothing serious. Well it could be I just don't quiet … no what I mean is .." Marie stopped then started over. "I think we need to leave this place." They're questioning looks were not surprising.

"Leave Erebor?" "Oin twisted his ear trumpet to hear correctly, "After all we've …"
"It's changing him." Marie blurted out. "Thorin I mean. He's been down in that chamber for three days now and I don't think he's eaten or slept."

Kili and Oin face's grew tight and Bofur's eyebrows came together in a concerned fashion. Fili was slowly turning his gaze down off the side of the pathway, to were to gold light could be seen. He was suddenly off down the stairs before anyone could tell him otherwise.

"Fili wait. Oh for goodness sake" Marie rushed after with Oin, Kili and Bofur following after. "Please Fili you don't …"

'You don't need to see him like this.'

But the young dwarf wasn't listening. For once he was the brother who acted before thinking.

She caught up with the youth as he abruptly stopped before the treasure when it came in sight. He looked stunned by it all, his pale blue eyes wide, not with awe, but with disbelief. Something he and Kili shared when the group reached them.

They had been raised on tales of this great horde, hearing every varied account of its size and contents and yet neither Kili or Fili had been prepared for this. Even Bofur and Oin had to stop and take a moment to just stare.

Fili wet his lips and took a deep breath, "I imagined it …"

"Smaller?" Bofur offered, "Grander? Organized? Melted down to paint the walls? You know I always wondered if a dragon would do so."

"Less ominous." Fili answered. So Marie wasn't the only one thinking along the same line.

Out of the shadows a figure moved slowly across the coins. Thorin. Now dressed as the part of a king. His robe resembled his old leather travel coat he'd lost in Mirkwood, but it was darker and longer, trailing about him and picking up coins as he moved. The think black fur almost overwhelmed Thorin as it blended into his own hair. Perhaps he moved slowly because the chain mail tunic that reached his feet underneath it all, or he just was distracted by … other things.

"Uncle!" Kili cried out. But the dwarf did not hear him. His lips were moving, muttering words Marie could just barely hear.

"Gold. Gold beyond measure. Beyond sorrow and grief."

Kili called out to him again but this time Thorin appeared to have listened. He raised his head and Marie visibly shrunk as the boys, Bofur and Oin finally saw what she had tried to explain.

Shadows covered the proud dwarf's face, predominantly under his eyes, giving him a haunted presence. Even just looking up at them he wasn't truly seeing them, not at first.

"Behold. The great treasure horde of Thror." He said with pride. Quicker than lightening his arm flew up and he had tossed something into the air. It reflected the torch light as it came towards them. Fili caught it at the last moment, a huge ruby bigger than his hand.

Thorin clapped a hand over his heart as he stared up at Kili and Fili, "Welcome, my sister's sons," He opened his arms wide, a smile on his lips that could be mistaken as crazed. "Welcome to the kingdom of Erebor."

A cold welcome judging by the other dwarves' expressions. They couldn't match the Thorin they
knew to this one.

"We are honored Uncle." Fili said, keeping an even tone.

"Find peace in these halls my kin," This was addressed to all of them, save Marie, "All you see before you … is ours." The king turned his back to them.

"Come." Marie tugged on Bofur's sleeve.

Well that had been a somewhat awkward moment. She should have caught Fili by the ear and dragged them to the others first and explained in more detail the situation. Marie wanted to run her hand over her face and groan loudly, highly unladylike yes but in what circumstance would anything she was doing or had done been any semblance of ladylike.

Fili hooked a hand around Marie's elbow and leaned in close as they walked. "What is this Marie? This is not like Thorin."

"Aye lass. I thought it was ghost at first." Bofur whispered in her other ear.

"It's … ah it is complicated." She admitted. "I'll take you to the others. Balin may have more answers than I."

Fili and Bofur must have heard the reluctance in her voice and did not press for anything else. Now she felt terrible for not saying anything and just blocked out their words as they talked amongst themselves about Thorin.

Hopefully a reunion with the others would help ease the tension.

~*~

And it did.

Marie directed them through the doorway to their quarters and immediately warmth and joyful cries filled the air as brothers and old friends were reunited. Bombur and Bifur refused to let Bofur go, Oin bumped heads with Gloin and Balin and the younger dwarves laughed and practically bounce with joy. Marie watched from the door way with a big smile on her face. Ever gruff Dwalin was grinning from ear to ear speaking with his old friend Oin.

"You aren't going to just stand there alone love?"

"Mm?"

Fili waved her over to join the group. Marie pulled at the sleeves of her coat awkwardly but made her way over to his open arms. Fili proceeded to crush her with his arms. Marie was now used to the power of dwarf hugs and just wrapped her arms around his neck. He raised her up so that her toes just brushed the floor. What he did next surprised the hobbit. Fili put her down and clasped his hands around her upper arms, staring intently into her eyes. "What are …" Marie was met with a sound thump as Fili brought their foreheads together.

"Ow!"

"Sorry." He pulled back. "I forget you're not us tough as a dwarrowdam."
"I'm plenty tough thank you." Marie said as a small red spot formed on her forehead. Fili chuckled and he and Bofur repeated the gesture with each other.

Marie felt a small tap on her shoulder and turned. It just Kili, smiling softly. "You look much better than when we parted." It was true, Marie was only now seeing that he walked without discomfort and that the darkness under his eyes had faded. But how? He had seemed to be getting worse when they had left for the mountain, and now he looked better than ever.

"Hehe, well that is quite a story." He shrugged.

"Indeed," Fili clapped his hand on his shoulder, "Never in my lifetime would I think I would owe so much to an elf." He said.

"An elf?"

"Aye." Fili grinned as she looked to Kili. Marie was sure he would hug her too but like his brother he placed his hands on her shoulders, close to the curve of her neck. He was more careful and pressed their heads together gently. Marie was quite honored to receive such an endearing gesture.

When the moved apart Kili quickly turned his but Marie caught sight of his flushed cheeks behind his long locks.

"Come here lass." Bofur, who had freed himself from Bombur's embrace and wrapped an arm around her shoulders rubbing her shoulder fondly, "When that flying snake came down upon us I thought for sure something had happen. Thank Durin I was wrong."

"I'll say." She mumbled. He smelt like salt and fish but it didn't matter. The unease in her chest lessened and for now she felt safe with her completed company.

Well, almost completed.

Marie wished Thorin was … himself, and here with them. She glanced around each one of the dwarves. Ori, to Dwalin, to Bombur. So many smiles that she had not seen for a long while. But something caught her eye from the doorway behind the group but when Marie focused there was nothing there. A shadow perhaps?

Whatever it was it was gone.
Old friends and new were once again together and settling back into the mild routine they had accomplished since gaining the mountain. Marie took it upon herself to see Bofur, Oin and the boys fed, washed and freshly clothed as a means to feel useful. Dori of course helped with finding some new shirts and tunics and a few more dresses he had hoped to dress her in. She politely turned the offer again and busied herself with cooking some of the dried meat for the new arrivals.

"Fili could you be a dear and bring me those plates?" She asked the blonde prince who had been hovering about the fire for the last ten minutes recounting to her what had happened in Lake Town. "So your saying that an elf just came though the ceiling just like that?"

He had gotten to the part where orcs had attack before the dragon did.

"Something like that." He said, helping her by holding the plates while she piled on the food. "Those elves made quick work of the scum. The blonde guard took of and Kili's she elf stayed behind."

"His what know?" Marie asked.

"Yes, apparently he made a friend while we were captured. Tauriel I think her names was." Fili took a few of the plates over to the table while Marie carried the rest. She had heard that name before in Mirkwood.

"Regardless she stayed behind and saved my brother's life. That is is a fact."

"What are you talking about Fee?" Kili snapped his head up from the table. He had been napping until his name had been mentioned. Oin sat opposite contently with his hands folded on the wooden table.

"Oh just your extraordinary elf Kili." Fili gave him his plate and ruffled his hair. "Always knew you had a thing for red heads."

"It's nothing like what you think it is." Kili grumbled.

Maire gave Oin is food with a small smile. The elder dwarf purposely left his ear drum hanging around his neck unused so that he was not listening to gossip. "I think it's sweet." She said.

"An elf and a dwarf can be friends." The level of Kili's voice was louder than it needed to be and he quickly lowered it. "Can they?"

"Calm yoself. Your brother and I are just pulling your leg." Marie patted his shoulder fondly. "I am sure that elves and dwarves can be friends, provided they can put their stubborn pride aside for two minutes."

"You'll be lucky to make it to one." Fili said and took a seat by Kili's side.

"Now," Marie looked about the room, "Where did Bofur run off to? I told him to stay put."

"He …. was here a moment ago." Kili looked over his shoulder then back to her, "He did mention something about Bifur."

Marie sighed and rubbed her temples, "Trying to keep track of dwarves is like trying to rangle
children I swear. Right then," She headed towards the door on the other side of the room, "Better find him."

"I'll go with you."

"No." Maire held up a finger to stop Kili. "You are going to sit and eat until that plate is clean by the time I get back. Don't make me force feed you."

Fili was clearly sniggering as his brother remained prone half way up from his seat thanks to Marie's command, his face pink. "I'll make sure he does so ma'am." Fili pulled Kili back into his seat and turned his head to his plate. Marie was pleased with this and head out to find Bofur. Her reasons behind her determined search was out of need to remain distracted. Looking after the dwarves kept her mind off Thorin and the Arkenstone … for the most part.

He was getting worse.

A few more brazers had been lit and helped Marie along her way, but did nothing to surpress the eeriness she felt. And it confused her as to where she had to go again.

'It is amazing how dwarves could navigate this place, considering how lost they can get.'

So Marie just followed the sounds she could pick up and with any luck she would find Bofur eventually. What she found in time was a large library instead.

"Mm. Must have taken a wrong turn." Scolls upon scolls were piled up on decreitive shelves that spanned for a mile and stood high above the tiny hobbit. There were also plenty of books and documents. "The Archives perhaps?" It felt nice for Marie to be surrounded by books again and it was comforting to know that the dragonfire had not damaged this place. But Marie was under the distinct impression that she wasn't alone. She could hear laboured breaths coming from within, slow uneven breathes that made Marie worry. With tentative steps, she approached whoever it was.

Through the bookcases, there was a mane of white hair hunched over a shelf.

Was that ... Balin? Shaking?

A loud sniff confirmed Marie's fear and she could no longer hang back. "Balin?" Her gentle voice still made the old dwarf flinch. He had a hand to his face to hide himself.

"Yes lass. Excuse me." His fingers pinched his large nose he faced her, still bracing against the shelf, "You seemed to have caught me at bad time."

"Are you alright?"

"Yes."

"I don't believe you." By now Marie had reached his side and placed a warm hand on his shoulder. He was losing composure again, but Marie was there for him. His humble wise eyes were blood shot and his jaw quivered. It was distressing to see such a kind person in such a state.

"Dragon Sickness." He finally said. "I've seen it before. That look, a terrible need."

"A terrible need?" Marie asked.

"Yes. A need that blinds you from all else. It is a fierce and jealous love Marie." Balin raised up his free hand, clenching it tightly, "It sent his grandfather mad."
Marie grabbed his hand and cradled it in between her's. "Balin. If ... if the Arkenstone if found ...?" 'Careful Maire.' "Would it help Thorin to have it?"

Balin eyed her curiously, "That stone crowns all." He said slowly, "It is the summit of this great wealth. Would is stay his madness? No dear. I fear it would only make him worse."

"Then what can we do?"

"For once, I am completely unsure if there is anything, other than pray that Thorin will come to his senses of his own volition." Balin sighed. "And soon I hope." He leaned closer to her, "I fear his madness is making him question."

Marie gulped. "Question what?"

"The loyalty of some. When Dwalin and I spoke with him early, he vowed retribution to any who withhold the Arkenstone from him." Marie felt there was a pit forming in her stomach.

"Perhaps if you were to talk with him."

"Me? How would that improve things?"

Balin smiled, but it was a sad smile. "You may not see it yourself Lass, but you bring out a part of him. A side of himself he never let's anyone, save for those he trusts and cares for most."

Marie's mouth gapped like a fish as she tried to answer. Balin took a deep breath and clasped her hands tightly, "Please Marie. Just try and speak with him."

~*~

Marie didn't go to Thorin like Balin had hoped, but to a quiet place to think some more.

What Balin had just told her only doubled the problem she was facing. If she gave Thorin the Arkenstone, he would fall further into madness. If she did nothing, he may continue to sift through each treasure pile himself until he found it. Now if he were find out the jewel was in her pocket the whole time he may very well punish her.

Dragon Sickness. A fierce and jealous love Balin had called it.

Marie had seen it in his eyes too and glanced at her wrist nervously to spot the bruised skin from where he had grabbed her.

He was always as gentle with her when he could be, when her neck was injured he was ever so careful inspecting it.

Marie licked her chapped lips and lent back against the cool wall. It hurt to think about that.

"What the ..." Something was scratching at the nape of her neck. A bug? Marie stood abruptly and a hand flew to her neck. She caught what ever it was between her middle and ring fingers, it was dry and crumbled a little. "Huh?" Marie brought her hand around to look at it and just about laughed. How ironic. After all that she had been through and had seen she still got a fright from this.
"What it is that?"

Marie's body jolted and she looked over her shoulder. Thorin was, in every sense of the word, charging towards her from shadows, the black fur of his robes made for a foreboding sight for the hobbit, who just stood there unable to move or speak until he was upon her.

"In your hand. Show me!" He thundered.

Marie's fingers opened wider and she looked down at her hand, Thorin following her gaze. There, resting in her palm was a dried yellow flower. A Sun Pebble.

Marie dared to peek up. He seemed devoid of his fury, slowly looking more and most lost in his eyes.

"It must have been caught in my collar." Marie finally said, faking an amused smile and let the flower crumble and fall from her hand. "That or I did a terrible job cleaning my hair. What would my mother think."

Thorin could only blink, his lips parted was a heavy sigh. Was he disappointed? Or perhaps relieved?

"Would … yoooouuu like to walk with me? I mean if you are not needing be somewhere at the moment." Marie asked. Thorin said nothing, not even a yes or a no, so Marie started to walk anyway. It was easy enough to hear him follow her thanks to his metal boots and he caught up to her in no time. And so they walked side by side.

'Just try and talk to him. The key word being 'try'. '

"I didn't see any flower on the way up the mountain. Shame really." Marie clasped her hands behind her back. "Not even a bud in sight." She watched his response out of the corner of her eye. He still looked withdrawn and had begun twisting that plain ring on his middle finger again with his thumb.

"This is causing you distress?" He asked.

Marie shrugged. "I had hoped to find at least a small patch of Sun Pebble."

"Whatever for?"

"To take back home."

Thorin raised an eyebrow. "A poor price to take back to the Shire."

"So what? I could plant it next to my Gardener's Gold." Marie's feet scuffed along the floor. "That would make me very happy indeed."

"You hobbits and your flowers." Did he scoff? He did. Marie got in front of him. "It's more than Thorin." Marie explained while walking backwards, "They will bloom in the Spring and Summer, and everytime I'd look at them, it will remind me of the adventure that led me to them and how lucky I am that I made it home."

Thorin slowed to a stop.

"What?" Marie teetered as her heel knocked on a stone pillar throwing her off balance for a second. "Woops!" Once she caught herself, she heard a deep rumbling noise. Thorin was chuckling and
those eyes of his, vague moments before, were shiny with amusement. Perhaps Balin was right. "Besides, I would be the only one to grow Uzud Abanel."

"You mean Urzud Abanul." Thorin corrected her, still twisting his ring so that it sat on his knuckle.

"Ur … Uzudul…"

"Abanul…"

"Uzudul Abanul. That's a mouthful." Marie coughed, "And it hurts the throat."

"It is a coarse language, not meant for the gentle like yourself." Thorin started walking again, shaking his head as he passed her.

Marie grinned and followed along after him. "And yet you have often made comment on my bitter tongue. Not bitter enough for your tastes Thorin?"

And with that the dwarf froze. Something she had said? Marie gently touched his arm. His brow was knitted together and there were lines forming around his eyes. He looked conflicted. A soft 'tink' could be heard and something bumped against Marie's foot. She looked down and saw Thorin's iron ring rolling about. He must have worn it completely off his finger without noticing and Marie bent down to retrieve it. But when she offered it to him he did not acknowledge it. "Thorin?"

"Tell me something Miss Baggins." He asked in a voice so low it could have been a whisper. "Do you wish to go home so badly?"

That was … a little out of context and surprised Marie. "Well … yes I miss the Shire."

"And if you had a chance to leave, at this moment, would you take it?"

"I …well when you ask it like that it just …umm." Marie was certainly confused. Her hand was still holding out his ring, a rather plain piece when compared to the gold a glittering stones he now wore. All it had was a simple rune etched into the iron. "If it was my only chance … perhaps, but …"

Just how would she get back home? Gandalf? He was still nowhere to be found.

Thorin reached for her hand, easily closing over her's ring and all. This felt very familiar to a flushed Marie, only reversed. The dwarf's thumb swept over her fingers, making the blush spread over her face faster. "You would always be welcomed here Marie." Thorin said, lost in his own world as he stared at their joined hands. Marie's heart started getting faster as she watched Thorin slowly smiling one of those rare smiles that made her stomach flip. "No doubt you could win over any dwarf … in time." Suddenly it was only the two of them. No treasure, no dark halls, nothing.

"Ugh … Thorin?"

"If asked … would you stay?"

'Did he just … did he just ask …?'

"Thorin!"

The spell over them was broken.
Dwalin was heading towards them, "The survivors from Lake Town, they're streaming into Dale." He informed them, seemingly oblivious to the situation of his king and their burglar. "There's hundreds of them."

Immediately Thorin's demeanor changed. His smile faded and was replaced with a scowl. A terrifying scowl. He let go of Marie's hand quickly and turned to Dwalin, storming back down into the dark with Dwalin close behind. "Call the men to the gate." He ordered, "To the gate!"

Marie could only stand there, holding her closed fist to her chest with Thorin's ring still in her possession and her answer left on the tip of her tongue.
The Will of Thorin

More stone was needed, more and more. There was no shortage of it thanks to Smaug's fumblings and every piece was carted to the main gate and the dwarves were. Thorin wanted the large hole closed off and soon.

By the time Marie had arrived at the gate there was already a steady line of work underway, leaving the hobbit to stand at the sides lost in the flurry of activity. When she could she would help push a cart and lifted some larger pieces but for the most part she was unclear for the need to build the barricade. What was going through Thorin's mind? Did he honestly think the Lake Men would storm the entrance any moment now? Granted they would easily overwhelm their small force Marie wanted to give them the benefit of the doubt.

Night settled over the mountain and the braziers above the shattered gate seemed dimmer than usual. More were lit and set about the working dwarves but still there seemed to be darkness on them. At Balin's suggestion Marie retrieved a canteen and replenished it with water. She went to and from each dwarf with the canteen to offer up a sip which was welcomed by all, but when she approached Thorin waved away the offer. "I am in no need, let another take extra should they please." He told her. Disheartened she went to Kili next who was taking her turn with the cart.

"Bring more stone. I want this fortress made safe by sun up." Thorin barked. "This mountain was hard won. I will not see it taken again."

The handle of the cart made a muted clunk when Kili dropped it. Marie edged back a little. "The people of Lake Town have nothing. They came to us in need Uncle." He said, an unspoken plea in his words. "They have lost everything." Marie glanced over her shoulder to see how Thorin would respond.

"Do not tell me what they have lost." Thorin pointed to himself. "I know well enough their hardship."

"Then," The hobbit adjusted the canteen to rest on her hip and face him, "You of all people should be the most sympathetic to them."

Thorin shook his head and swept an arm around towards Dale. "You fail to see the blessing of it all. Those who have lived through Dragon Fire should rejoice. They have much to be grateful for." Fili was watching Thorin from under hooded eyelids while he worked, containing his concern it appeared if the lines around his eyes were anything to go on. Marie should know from the amount of times she herself had to restrain herself with certain relatives. Kili shared his brother's state of mind but did a far less better job at hiding it.

Marie passed the canteen to him and brought his attention back to the present.

"Being alive is a blessing, I'll say that much." She said quietly to him, "But it can't fill empty bellies and drive off the cold." Kili looked like he wanted to say something in return but Marie just pushed the canteen into his hands. "Just wait. He may yet come round in time." Marie said, and hoped.

Kili nodded and took a long swig of the water as Thorin called for more stone.

How much more until he was satisfied?
It took time, in fact the whole night of chipping, lifting and hammering to finish what Thorin had ordered of them. Marie had missed the last few parts of the construction since she kept napping on the sides. Not that the dwarves minded since she kept getting away with it. She could hardly hold up her head let alone a rock.

Marie would never have thought that the wheel of a cart would provide such a comfy spot to sleep against, but not for long. She was woken by the urgent and loud whispers of someone on the other side of the cart. In her haziness Marie caught only a fraction of what was being said but it sounded like two voices.

"You can not deny it."

"I am not. But we must be cautious little brother, we do not know for sure why he is acting this way."

Marie shifted off her hip when she lost feeling in her leg. Through the spokes of the wheel she glimpsed two large pairs of boots, with one shifting about more than the other. Kili had a habit of doing that when trying to stand still.

"I remember the stories the elders whispered about our Great Grandfather. Don't think me naive Fili."

"I think you irrational more than anything. Thorin is both our king and our kin, we must try to have faith that …" The volume of Fili's voice lowered and Marie could not hear anymore. Whatever was said it made Kili walk away loudly. Marie waited until she saw Fili's feet shuffle out of sight after Kili, then she stood with a groan. Everything hurt.

If anything was to kill her on this adventure it would be sleep deprivation.

She rubbed her eyes but bumped her nose on something solid around her finger. After a moment she remembered she still had Thorin's iron ring and had slipped it onto her finger to keep safe. It was far too big on her and just managed not to slip off.

She looked over and saw that a fine wall filled up where the broken gate once stood. Shattered fragments of stairways had been altered for a means to get up and down the wall and two braziers were placed into the stone. The dwarves sat about the site making final touches or inspecting weapons. They did not seem tired, in fact they looked remarkable alert, on edge. Marie wondered what had them so ready. Somewhere along the great corridor behind her, she heard faint whispers coming from a dark alcove, and like an idle fool Marie slowly went towards it. She recognized the hash throaty sounds of Khuzdul, it rumbled like distant thunder.

Out of the black shadows a large object flew out and just barely missed the nosy hobbit. Marie yelped and threw her hands over her head as she ducked.

"CAW!"

Marie looked up through her curls and saw a large raven flapping its great wings above her. "What on earth?" She muttered to herself as a second figure emerged from the alcove. It was Thorin. She expected another dwarf to emerge but it only the dwarf king appeared.

"What is wrong?" He asked, as if all as normal with the world. He extended an arm and the raven
landed on it gracefully.

"Wrong? I almost had an eye scratched out by a bird." Marie said and ruffled her hair out of her face, "I would ask the same of you. Were you just …talking to a raven just now?" She knew it was a silly question but it still had to be asked.

Thorin shook his head and looked away from her, "It doesn't concern you Marie."

The hobbit felt a flush of anger in her cheeks. Was her role so inconsequential now that she may not be privy to the goings on? As if in response Thorin muttered something to the raven, which shrieked and took flight. It flew towards the open sky beyond the barricade. Clearly Marie had missed something.

"What is happening Thorin, please?" She sounded exasperated even to herself.

His lips curled back into a sneer as he said "Elves."

Elves? Really?

Before any further explanation could be given, Thorin stormed towards the barricade, his coat billowing out behind him. He called for the dwarves to follow him up the barricade, to which they all scrambled for a weapon before doing so. It was Marie's first climb up the thing and she couldn't help but be cautious doing so. But it was sturdy as the dwarves that built it.

Marie had expected to see the same scenic view for the ruins of Dale she had seen since they arrived, but she did not expect throws of elven soldiers stationed on its moss covered walls, long golden banners swaying in the wind. No wonder the dwarves were in such a state. 'Why were they here? Surely the Elven King isn't that desperate to get his prisoners back.'

"Rider approaching!" Dwalin called out. Marie tried to pull herself up to get a better view over the barricade and see for herself. There was rider heading towards the gate, stopping short of the gangway. Marie stretched until her toes cramped up.

She knew that rider.

"Hail Thorin, son of Thrain!" That was Bard. Of all people, it was Bard. Marie felt much joy to know for sure now that he survived. "We are glad to find you alive beyond hope."

"Why do you come before the gates of the King Under the Mountain armed for war?" Thorin called down to the bargemen looking down on him. Marie looked over at Thorin who was silent in contemplation. He inclined his head and placed his hands against the ledge. "Well? I am listening."

It wasn't just Marie watching the next few moments with intrigue. All of the dwarves were quiet, still, waiting for anything. Bard dismounted the horse and walked the rest of the way over the bridge. "On behalf of the people of Lake Town, I ask that you honour your pledge. A share of the
treasure so that they may rebuild their lives."

For Bard to be the one asking this must have meant that the people were in dire need since he made it clear where he stood the night that bargain was made. But unfortunately, mention the treasure was not the best thing to make Thorin agreeable. "I will not treat with any man about such thing while an armed host lies before my door." Marie could see his eyes dart towards Dale and the bowman.

"That armed host will attack this mountain if we do not come to terms."

"Your threats do not sway me."

Marie threw a hasty side look to her left where Balin stood and muttered under her breath to him, "It didn't sound like a threat to me."

Balin sighed, "Too often a warning and a threat may be one in the same." He whispered back. Marie looked back down at Bard and came to the conclusion that this would be a downhill struggle.

"Tell me then … my Lord. What of you conscious? Does it not tell you our cause just? My people offered you help and return you brought about the dragon's wrath and ruin."

"When did the men of Lake Town come to our aid but for the promise of rich reward?"

"A bargain was struck …"

"A bargain!" Thorin spat back. "What choice did we have but to barter our birthright for blankets and food? To ransom our future in exchange for our freedom? You call that a fair trade?! Tell me Bard the Dragonslayer, why should I honor such terms?!"

"Because you gave us your word. Does that mean nothing to you?"

That must have struck a chord with Thorin. He went silent and averted his eyes from Bard which Marie hoped was a positive sign.

"Please, please, please just consider it. Please."

But even with all her wishing, it did not alter the outcome.

"Begone! Ere our arrows fly!" Thorin bellowed down to the bargeman and stood back. Negotiations were over it seems and Marie wanted to hit her head on a boulder. The rest of the dwarves said nothing which did not help.

"This does not concern you." He wouldn't even look at her as he spoke. "This doesn't, that doesn't, you keep tell me. Well, I beg to differ because it bloody well gives me cause to be concerned." Marie snapped back. "Unless my eyesight is failing me, which it isn't, it's fourteen against an entire army, not including the several hundred angry fishing folk."

The dwarves' response to her was a stoic glance, save Bofur, Balin and Kili, whose eyes shifted with concerned agreement. Thorin chuckled.

"What's so bloody amusing? Did you hear me Thorin? We are outnumbered?"

"For now." He turned, with a smile from ear to ear. An unnerving sight to Marie as he stepped forward towards her. "If there is one thing you should know by now Miss Baggins," He placed his hand on her shoulder. "You should never underestimate dwarves." He turned back and locked his gaze on Dale and on the figure of Bard on horseback riding further from sight. He kept his hand on
Marie, his heavy rings digging into her shoulder as he tightened his grip. "We have reclaimed Erebor. Now we defend it."

Marie almost shuddered at the tone of his voice, more threatening than she had ever heard it. The weight slid off her shoulder signaling Thorin taking his leave. Marie looked to Balin for something, anything, but the old adviser looked on the verge of tears as he hid behind a raised hand.

'I am sorry Balin. I tried … but my words couldn't reach him.'
Kay so, two things. I have taken some liberties with the One Ring's actual powers so bare with me and there is a tiny itsy bitsy bit of the Kili/Marie pairing here but it's really one sided.

Thank you :)

Whether the company wanted to go to war or not went unspoken as they prepare for whatever came from the Elves and the men of the Lake. They knew Thorin was not himself yet the remained silent, submitting to his decision. Loyal beyond sense the whole lot of them. Thoirn commanded the bridge destroyed, they did so. He told them to 'prepare for war', they set to work in the giant armory.

That was how Marie found herself, waiting back in the living quarters while the dwarves fished out an assortment of shields, chainmail, axes, swords and many other tools of war. Even from five levels down, it made Marie's stomach churn, and her ears hurt. She was accustomed to the volume that could be reached in a crowded place and sometimes the dinning table when enough women were having scones. But these were not the sounds of eagerness, comfort and the promise of a laugh. These noises were the signal of war. For a time she stood around the armory like a mouse trapped in a kitchen, edged into the walls until she found herself in the company of dusty mounts of the most ludicrous sets of armor she had seen. By some good grace Dwalin saw her distress and shooed her out, under the pretense that it was no place for a lady.

Marie wrapped herself in her arms as she paced the lengthy room, shifting the Arkenstone in her pocket as she did. Fear brushed against her mind and she glanced all around like someone, somewhere had seen it move. But she was all alone.

"Well done Marie. Now every crack and scrap will be suspect." She chided herself. After one last lap of the room she decided to sit down for her blistered feet's sake and made her way to her small cot in the adjoining room. Marie gave a heavy sigh and pulled her legs up onto the cot and drew her magic ring from her pocket. "What to do? What to do? What to do?" What could she do? She knew nothing of warfare, or it's glory.

Marie twirled the gold band around lazily.

Now the dwarves, they understood it. Marie remembered how well suited most of her companions looked in their armor as they were preparing downstairs. They thrived on the glory of it for it was part of their heritage. She was a hobbit and hobbits don't fight, at least not physically. Against her better judgement she chuckled at the visual of her shouting from the top of the wall at the fighting.

By accident, the ring slipped onto her middle finger and Marie was enveloped by magic. Something was wrong though. It did not feel as heavy as she'd come to expect, in fact it seemed to be moving around her like wind and even sounded like a howling storm. It grew colder and Marie thought she could feel the air in her lungs being sucked out of her.

'Gu kibum .... kelkum-ish .... burzum-ishi.'
Marie raised her hand up in front of her, the ring glowing around her finger like a flame.

'Akha-gum-ishi ashi gurum.'

The howling became shrieking and Marie awkwardly spun in her cot in search for the noises source. Instead of a blank wall behind her there was a great ball of fire hurtling towards her. Marie tried to gasp but couldn't, her lungs had frozen up.

It was Smaug. He had come back for her to finish what he started. Marie felt herself falling back, away from the fire.

But it never touched her.

In her thrashing Marie had fallen off the cot and hit the floor which knocked her whole body back into working again. It's not real. It's not real! She yanked the ring off and took a large gulp of air. She rolled onto her side, hair falling in her face as she clawed at the floor.

"Ow." She muttered feebly.

"Miss Baggins!"

The hobbit could have just died when Thorin called for her. She got up off the floor little too quickly and almost fell back from dizziness but she caught herself and calmly walked out into the living quarters, the ring safely back in her pocket. Thorin was dressed in full battle armor from head to toe. The light reflected of each piece making it appear to be made of gold. He looked dangerous, large and glorious.

"Wow … eelll" Marie corrected herself. "You … that is a … You are well suited for um … that look. I mean … " Marie knew she probably looked like a mess.

Thorin's eyes narrowed.

"What? Something wrong?"

"Are you alright? You look flushed." The initial sharpness to his glare softened.

"I … fell. I was … taking a nap and I just … well." Marie shrugged. "This happened."

"A nightmare?"

Marie licked her bottom lip to ease the sting of the chapped skin, "Of sorts." Give it another few hours she could be very well witnessing a nightmare at the gates.

"I have something for you." He said but showed no indication of moving from the doorway, so Marie had to go to him. As she drew closer she noticed he was holding what looked like a white shirt. Thorin held it up. "You're going to needs this. I do not expect nor will allow you to involve yourself with the battle but you shall have protection." Marie reached out to touch it as it hung between them. It felt so light. "This vest is made of silver steel." He told her. "Mithrel it was called by my forefathers. No blade can pierce it."

Marie gingerly took the shirt from him and looked closer. It looked to be made of tiny rings no bigger than a needle's eye all linked together. The collar was heavy with jeweled embroidery that the thread could have been metal as well.

"This … this seems a bit much, don't you think Thorin?"
The dwarf appeared so calm, much more than he had been for days now and Marie felt her heart giving a little flutter. "It is a gift. A token of our friendship."

Marie didn't know what she should have said. Give him thanks for the gift? Or ask if it was only friendship he wanted of her? Given the mixed signals she had been receiving the last few weeks it would be nice to know. For now though, manners first. "Thank you Thorin."

Something snapped in his eyes and Marie started to worry once more. "True friends are hard to come by." He clutched her shoulder suddenly. "I have been blind, but now I am beginning to see." He growled, leaning in close to the hobbit. "I am betrayed!"

Marie shrank under his gaze. "What?"

"The Arkenstone."

Marie felt like she had been dropped from the top of the highest point of the mountain. Did he know? How? Her knees were shaking and she dared not breathe.

Thorin glanced over his shoulder, as if there was someone else in the room. The tension double as Marie waited for her doom, clutching the Mithrel shirt to her chest.

"One of them has taken it."

If it was possible, Marie was sure her heart gave out, started up again only to be stopped once more.

"One of them is false." Thorin eyes narrowed as he almost hissed his suspicion. Marie would not let one of the others take the blame for her indecision.

"Thorin." She squeaked, "The quest is for filled. You've won the mountain back, is that not enough?"

"Betrayed by own people."

Was he even listening to her? "Thorin you gave your word. You are a man of honor. Is this treasure truly worth more than you honor?" Somehow she managed to regain some of his attention. He had a lost look in his eyes. They were not the clear steady color of the sky and more like murky water. "I vouched for you to the Master. I still believe you to be an honest man."

"And for that I am grateful Marie. Truly, but .." His voice shifted, "The treasure in this mountain doesn't belong to the people of Laketown. This ..." Thorin closed his eyes, the lines of his brow drew together tightly in what looked like pain. Marie reached out to touch him but froze when his eyes opened and she was met with an eerily familiar glare. "This gold is ours, and ours alone." His armor rattled ever so slightly with his movements as he withdrew from Marie. "By my life, I will not part with a single coin. Not one piece of it."

Those words.

Those exact words.

Marie had heard the before, from Smaug himself. The world seemed to move so slowly around them, making it so much worse for the hobbit as Thorin went to leave, his beloved treasure to defend.

She felt the Mithrel slip from her fingers and fall to the floor, but Marie could only focus on
Thorin. She groped the air until she caught his armored arm but he did not feel it. It was like pulling on a tree trunk. So she rushed in front of the dwarf. Even then he didn't acknowledge her and gazed forward. That is until Marie took his face in her hand and forced him to look at her. Before he could question herself as to why, she pushed up on her toes and kissed him.

It was so painfully still between them, but Marie held onto that moment. The scratch of her beard, the intake of breath Thorin took in the second before, the blood pounding in her ears. Even as she pulled away she wanted time to cease just to cling onto him a little longer.

"Please don't do this." Marie opened her eyes. Thorin looked so confused, gazing down at the hobbit in silence. Marie felt his jaw clench and unclench beneath her hands like he was trying to speak but was unable to find the words. "You don't have to fight. You're home now, this is what matters Thorin."

He turned his face into her left hand, lips pressing into the palm as his own hand covered it. He grimaced as if in pain and Marie thought she could feel him shaking. The metal encasing his fingers was cold and dug into her skin as he sharply gripped her hand. "I ... can't" Thorin pulled himself from her and left. Marie just stayed there, listening to his loud exit echoed on and on down the lengthy passage.

She should been crushed, enraged even, but all she felt was overwhelmingly despair. Marie tried to hold it all in, but it welled up in her chest until it hurt too much. The strength in her legs went and Marie sunk to her knees, the tears finally falling and running over the hand covering her mouth. All at once she remembered that hazy night in Laketown. She remembered his beard under her fingers, the scent of burnt wood and the taste of wine. Her covered mouth muffled the strange yelp of a sob the she made, such an undignified noise but Marie couldn't stop it.

She was hurting.

She was hurting because Thorin was hurting, or so her mind wanted to believe like some lovesick maid. Marie knew who the real Thorin was, how passionate and strong he was, his small displays of affection for his nephews, his comradery with Dwalin and Balin. But above all was the trust he had in every single member of the company. Marie believed in that trust.

Thorin had to be stopped before he destroyed all of that, and that included saving him from himself. That for Marie meant making a very difficult and heartbreaking decision. She abhorred the notion of it and yet it was the only way, it was the right way.

She was going to break Thorin's trust.

And she had just the means to do so.

~*~

Marie went into hiding, leaving in her place a well stuffed pillow wrapped in a blanket on her cot. With any luck the dwarves will think her asleep and not think twice to look under the blanket. It would have been easier to have simply used the magic ring but after the last time she put it on it was probably for the best not to.

Her insides were already churned up as it was.

Once she absolutely sure none on the dwarves were lingering about the barricade she scurried up the wall, quiet as a mouse. There was no way she could recall the hidden passage on her own and
asking one of the dwarves would raise questions. This was the most direct way to get to Dale. At the top of the wall a line of bows and fully stocked quivers had been set in place. Marie ignored this and pulled looked over the edge at the climb down before her.

'Ooh my.' A twenty foot drop by her reckoning. The gangway had been destroyed and had flooded over the debris. 'Well if I fall I'll hit either the water or the rocks. A grim prospect.' But just how was she to get down in the first place? She could scale down the wall but didn't trust herself to keep her grip. Marie looked around at the mess left behind in the wall's construction. A ladder was too obvious. Rope perhaps. There was plenty from the pulleys. Marie scrambled for whatever rope she could find, using Sting to cut off the metal pulls. The hobbit paused every few seconds to check her surroundings, but heard nothing and kept going until she had enough. She tied one end to an old torch mount that was little more than a metal ring. After a few experimental tugs Marie deemed the knot tight enough. The sun had long since set, giving Marie the perfect cover

"Who goes there?"

Marie froze. How did she not hear someone approach?

She quickly dropped to rope and stood, kicking the rest into the shadows.

"Is that you Marie?" Of all people to find her it was Kili. "Ugh yes. Yes it's just me Kili." The young dwarf was at the other other end of the wall on guard watch no doubt.

"I thought you were already asleep."

"I was. But ... I woke up and thought some fresh air would help with my head. Blasted thing has been pounding all day."

But there was no fooling him, not with those sharp eyes of his. Kili could see the rope and the guilt on her face clearly but not the reason. "You're running away?"

Marie decided to spare him anymore fibs. "No Kili. But I am about to do something foolhardy, something you may hate me for."

"I couldn't hate you Marie. Honestly." He glanced behind him before closing the gap between them. He lowered his voice in case of any prying ears lingering in the shadows. "But what must you do? Tell me please. I can help if I can."

"You can't help me Kili. Not with this." Marie shook her head.

"I don't even know what 'this' is."

"I intend to prevent a war."

"How? What could ...?" Slowly Kili started to put two and two together. "Oh no Marie are you ...!"

"Shhh!" Marie hissed and in her panic she covered his mouth. Both of them waited a tense few seconds in case the out mild outburst attracted someone. Kili was the first to breathe again and pulled Marie's hand away, clutching it tightly. "Are you mad Marie?" He whispered. "Thorin is still searching high and low and you're going to give it away to the enemy?"

"Are they though?" Marie countered ans the young dwarf's mouth twitched. "Admit it you don't want to fight them."
"I … I …" Kili couldn't answer her.

"This is something I have to accomplish alone and to involve anyone else would …. Understand that what I am about to do is because I care. Remember when you asked me about what it is to love?" Marie made her tone softer. "Well sometimes … you do thing, anything if it meant protecting the one you love most, even if that includes hurting them." Oh Heaven help her, he just stared at her with his dark brown eyes as he began to realize what she was also saying. "If you care for Thorin at all, if you care for me at all, you'll let me do this."

Kili sighed and finally let go of her hand. He turned his gaze to the ground. "If anyone asked …. I never saw you here. This meeting … this conversation never happened."

"Thank you Kili," Marie said, relieved that the young dwarf understood at last. "I hope tha… mmmgh" She was cut off abruptly when Kili quite suddenly kissed her.

Marie just stood there, stunned at his bold action. He kiss was at an odd angle, rushed and quite hard like an anxious teen's first try. When he finally released her lips he refused to look at Marie, and she could not find the fight right words to say. "This … never happened." He said quietly.

"Oh ... Kili."

Marie watched the dwarf trudge back across the barricade with a heavy heart. For his sake, Marie waited until he was gone before finishing what she started. He already knew what she was going to do, no need for him to see her do it. Marie grabbed the rope from off the floor. 'Remember Kili. I do this for you, for all of them .... and for Thorin.'

With a heavy heart, she tossed one end over the edge.
There were two options Marie could use to get herself into Dale, both as risky as the next. She had the entire time she spent running across the dark, empty land between the ruins and the mountain to pick one yet she hadn't. The first was the hobbit simply slipping on her ring and go completely unseen by any guards and the second was to look for a hole in ruined walls of Dale and sneak in, yet she still didn't want to use the ring in case she became disorientated from its magic again and finding a way in without being spotted by elves could have taken all night.

Fortunately for Marie, the decision was made for her. Before she made the draw bridge an arrow came out of the dark to greet her, just barely brushing past her ear and taking a strand or two of hair with it. A warning shot. Marie threw herself behind a rock and fumbled about trying to get her ring out, almost dropping it with all her haste. Once it was safely around her middle finger and the howling rung out in her ears she made a dash for the gangway, secure that her invisibility would prevent anymore guards taking a shot at her. She still felt like she was battling against a storm but she kept her eyes forward and fisted her hands. Magic or not she had come too far to falter. She passed two Lake men standing guard with a shovel and a rusted pitchfork without suspicion but was only halfway done. Marie jumped to the side to avoid being trampled by the marching elves and braced herself in a doorway. When she was sure no one was looking in her direction she removed the gold ring as it's magic was too distracting. No one questioned or looked twice at her as she quickly made her way through the decrepit streets, seemingly being mistaken for a wayward child p after their bed time. She was extra careful when she was in the open. It wasn't until she was in the upper levels of the city she had some luck in finding Bard as many of the former Lake Town residence had set up camp near what must have been the Great Hall.

Many men and young boys were hard at work sharpening the tips of spears and swords, even a few women held a weapon at their sides from what Marie could see. Across the way she could also see a large tent set up on the very edge of the ruins, elvish by design and surrounded by guards. Marie didn't need to think twice as to whose tent that was, thanks to the familiar gold on the guard's armor. King Thranduil was in there. However Marie was surprised to see Bard emerging from the tent, but in a way it did make sense. He spoke for the people of Lake Town at the mountain so naturally he spoke for them to the Elven King. Marie quickened her feet to get to him before he took off somewhere but he was stayed by another coming out of the tent. It wasn't the Elven King. Their robes were poorer in comparison and their hair was grey ... grey?

"Oh my word is it ...?"

It was him. Oh Marie cold of stuck the old man with Sting for being so bloody late. "Gandalf!"

Both men stopped their talking and looked over to her, both as surprised as the other.

"Marie? Oh Marie my dear." Gandalf sounded so very relieved to see her, as she was to see him. He knelt down as she came to a stop and place a hand on her shoulder.

"Where the blazes have you been?" Marie asked, her eyes darting about his weathered face that was covered with scratches. A particularly large cut on his temple was clotted with blood and dirt.

"My plan to return was unfortunately ... interrupted." Was all the wizard said on the matter. "And from what I gather, you situation was no better than mine." He got to his feet and looked around to the elves and mortals readying for battle.

"Indeed, it is the same here as in the mountain." Marie said. "All doom, death and wanton
violence."

"I have told you before, it will not come to that." Bard said.

"And as I told you, you are facing the wrong direction to face your enemy." Gandalf counted.

"You both speak as if there is to be a full out war at dawn. The dwarves are outnumbered."

"You clearly don't know much about dwarves." Marie shook her head. "Numbers don't matter to them, they will fight to the death if they must to defend their own."

"Then what? Thorin has already made it clear he will not hear another word from me or my people and Thranduil will not treat with him."

"He would if he had the right enticement."

The wizard and former bargeman both cocked an eyebrow at Marie. "Just what might that be my dear?" Gandalf asked. Marie pointed to the tent. "Let me speak with Thranduil and yourselves, and you shall see."

"You would barter with the Elven King?" Marie was sure Bard didn't mean to but there was a trace of a chuckle in his voice. She just lifted her chin confidently, "I conversed with a fire breathing dragon, I can talk with a simple Elven King."

Bard could only stare at her with bewilderment before glancing at Gandalf who nodded to him with a proud smile. Bard relented and turned back towards the tent, while Gandalf gently nudged Marie along after.

"My Lord Thranduil." Marie heard the mortal man say as she entered. "We have a messenger from the dwarves." The tent held a few piece of decorative furniture included a throne made of twisted wood and was lit with half a dozen small candles set in tear shaped holders. The elf in question was standing on the other side of the tent by a stand with pieces of elegant armor hanging from it. Marie was close to losing her nerve as he turned to them. He was draped in a shimmering cloak that reflected off his ever pale skin and hair. Around his brow he wore a silver circlet with a moonstone at his center that flicked with all the movement.

Marie remembered herself and stopped her gawking.

Thranduil eyed her with a hint of curiosity. "And what is this Mithrandir? Another ploy to sway me?"

"No. This is none of my machinations." Gandalf stood by Marie side. "May I present Mariellena Baggins of Bag End. Formerly of the Shire."

Marie wasn't sure if she should have curtsied or not, but she was so tensely holding herself up she didn't think she could of. She watched Thranduil as he walked across the floor to his throne, he too watched her carefully. Bard had also taken a seat to the side.

"A halfling where she shouldn't be, how could this be anything but your work?" Thranduil said. He had a point there and all Gandalf could do was give a muffled grunt he sometimes did.

"My Lord." Marie began. "I am a member of the Company of Thorin Oakenshield, so hired to be their official burglar. And I did not come here at any behest but my own."

"My people captured Thorin and his so called company when they trespassed on my lands and
there were only thirteen. If you are a member, how is it you evaded capture?" He was testing her.

"For the very reason I was hired. I am good at being unseen."

Thranduil slowly sat, or more accurately lounged into his throne. His bright unrelenting eyes narrowed. "Then, if I am not mistaken, you are the one who stole the keys to my dungeon from under the nose of my guards."

"I am very good. And with all due respect my Lord, your guards made it easy."

There was a brief silence as Marie waited for the king's response, but she could swear that out of her eye she could spot Bard holding back a smirk. The lack of a retort of a dismissal gave Marie cause to continue. "As I said, I here for my own reason." She ached into her coat and took out the wrapped up flag. She set it on the table in the center of the table and pulled back the flag. "I came to give you this."

All three men gazed in wonder at the Arkenstone, its alluring light reflecting of the material like a halo. It made Thranduil and Bard stand and draw closer.

"The Heart of the Mountain. The King's jewel." Thanduil breathed

"And worth a King's ransom no doubt." Bard concurred and looked back at the quiet hobbit. He was catching on to why she brought the Arkenstone. "How is this your's to give?"

"As a member of the company I am entitled to a fourteenth share of the treasure, so I took it as part of my claim, a claim that I am allowed to give to whomever" Marie said in an ever tone.

"Why would you do this Marie?" Bard asked her softly, tearing his gazed from the jewel. "You owe us nothing." Thranduil, who had holding his hand above the Arkenstone without touching it, also glanced at the hobbit.

'Oh I owe your people a great deal,'

"In truth I'm doing this more for the dwarves than you." Marie dropped her eyes. Yes she was doing this for them and they will hate her for it. She sucked in a breath and looked back up at the two. "I know first hand that dwarves can be obstinate, stubborn and lacking in most table manners. But they are also very kind, brave and loyal to a fault. I have grown very fond of them and I would save them if I could." Her thoughts took her back to her first impressions of the company and how she had wished them out her door and out of her life, now ... now they were lodged in her heart as her dearest friends. She looked over to the quiet wizard. If the situation was not so dire Marie was sure he would be a whole lot smug at what she had said. "Thorin values this stone more than anything and for its return I believe he will give you what you are owed. There will be no need for war."

Thranduil glanced at Bard from under hooded eyes, "Do you believe her?"

"She's honest enough, and her heart is in the right place." Bard said. "So yes. I believe her." He seemed hopeful with the plan. Thanduil did not. He rounded the table so that towered over Marie. "How do we know that is not some trick? What do you have to prove yourself Mariellena Baggins? You are, as you said, a burglar."

Marie would not be bullied out of her conviction. "I may be a burglar but I would like think that I am an honest one. But let me ask you this Lord Thranduil. What do you have to lose?"
The gates of Erebor didn't look as far away as Marie had first thought, and much bigger too. The hobbit was standing outside the Elven King's tent while waiting for Gandalf to plead the last of her case to Thranduil so that a decision could be made, with a few points of his own.

Marie was more than happy to have the time alone while it lasted and simply gazed out over the land between Dale and the mountain. The snow was falling and flakes began catching in her hair which had come completely free and sat on her chilled cheeks. Marie looked down where the large dwarvish ring around her finger, the cold was starting to bite into the digit quite painfully now.

Or perhaps it was the guilt.

"You are always full of surprises." Marie brushed back her hair as Bard approached her from the tent. "You held yourself very well in there, even Thranduil was impressed."

"Oh really? All I got was a good glare from him. Hardly anything that resembled being impressed." Marie said.

Bard let out a long breath which turned to frost. Marie took this chance to look at him properly. He was no longer in his dowdy old coat and mesh vest, but wore a full chainmail tunic and a fine felt jacket of dark blue and black. A more refined look for a leader. "We will make one last try to reason with the King Under the Mountain at dawn." He said finally.

"Good."

"But Thranduil will still have his army in place. Presumably to make a point to Thorin."

Marie sighed. "Of course he will."

"For what it's worth Marie, I did not wish for war either. My people have been through enough hardship. Allying with the elves was out of necessity not spite."

"I understand Bard. You do not need to justify yourself to me ... of all people."

Bard's expression softened. "I am truly glad to see that you are well. Be a shame to lose such lovely eyes."

"Trying to keep in my favor are we?"

"One can try." The two shared a small smile. It was comforting to know that Bard did not bare her any ill will. "I'll have Sigrid find you some food and a bed. It's been a rough day and I'm sure you can use it."

"A splendid idea Master Bard." Gandalf said, joining them from wherever he popped out from. He had a habit of doing that. He had his long pipe in hand and lit it with a flick of his fingers. "If you don't mind I would like a word in private with Marie please."

Bard nodded to Gandalf and then to Marie. "As you wish." Gandalf waited until he was out of ear shot before he said anything and brought the pipe up to his lips.

"Is everything alright Gandalf?" Marie cocked her head to the side.

"Mmmm ... I fear not." He muttered, smoke creeping out of his mouth as he did. "I have something
"I need you to do."

"Oh?"

"Before Thranduil rides out with his army, you must leave. Get as far away from this place as you can. I will join you at the appropriate time."


"Yes I can." Gandalf took puff. "While these kings sit and argue over century long slights the real danger grows ever closer to us. I did not wish to tell you but in the end we are all in danger."

Gandalf turned his gaze to the south. "There is an army out there, heading straight for this mountain Marie, orcs and other unsavoury beasts with one purpose. To kill all that stand in its way."

"An army?" Marie's throat tightened and she looked at the ground. "Azog."

The wizard heard her and sharply trained his eyes back to her. "The Defiler. Yes." If Marie looked up she would have seen a raised suspicious eyebrow. But all she could think about was back when the company had arrived at the Skin Changer's house, when she saw that vision with her ring.

Had it been a prophetic vision of what was to come?

Marie shook her head. "Gandalf, you picked me as the fourteenth member and I am most certainly not going to turn tail now."

"There is no company, not anymore. And I don't like to think of Thorin will do when he finds out what you've done."

"You make it sound like I should be afraid of him."

"Well you should be."

The hobbit swallowed hard.

"Do not underestimate the evil of gold Marie, gold over which a serpent has brooded over. Dragon Sickness seeps into the heart of all those who come near this mountain."

"Not all." Marie said. "The others are not so affect by it. They only follow what Thorin wants since ... he is their king. They are not ... they are ..." She lost her ability to finish the sentence, the words escaping her completely. But thankfully Gandalf understood in his own way and did not press for more, instead offering her his long pipe. "It will help settle the nerves my dear."

Not since she was a teen had she had a puff, when the older cousins used to pass their pipes back and forth she share the Longbottom Leaf after tea. It wouldn't hurt, but she would look a right mess when she sputtered out the smoke. Much to her surprise she didn't and savored the taste of it before releasing, watching as the wisps floated and danced with the falling snow until fading to nothing.
Peace Talks and War Cries

'Forgive me.'

Marie stared up at the roof, counting the beating of her heart in tandem with the rise and fall of her chest. She didn't sleep a wink for the rest of the night but lay still on the bed, hands folded together across the blanket. Her heart was ever so steady despite all that had transpired.

'Forgive me.'

Contrary to Gandalf's belief Marie was not tucked away in Dale somewhere like he had hoped. Once she had been fed and left to rest Marie snuck into the night and back to Erebor. She would not hide behind their skirts when Thranduil and Bard presented their ultimatum to Thorin, not after everything ...

She would answer for her actions. Slipping back into Erebor was simple enough, a quick change of place and a helping of magic and no one knew any different, the sounds of the dwarves moving about the other room were far away in her mind. Now she had both betrayed her comrades and abused Bard's hospitality by leaving without a word. She could not rest easy and the food now soured in her belly.

'Forgive me.'

Like a mantra she whispered these words in her mind, imagining that if she repeated it enough times it would cleanse her of her guilt.

Time passed slowly in Erebor. Perhaps it was the stone, trapping time itself, preserving the city and its strange beauty.

Strange beauty.

Belladonna Took had once used that term herself a long time ago.

"Mammy!"

It was raining that day and little Marie wasn't doing well being coped up inside Bag End. Belladonna had made use of the time by baking raisin scones for Bungo's brother who was ill. She had quieted her daughter with a cup of hot milk but the little hobbit had been silent for long enough.

"Mammy?"

"Yes love?" Belladonna brushed the floor off her hands on her apron.

"Why is my name Mariellena?"

Her mother cocked an amused eyebrow, "What a funny question. What brought this up?"

"All the other girls have ..." Marie looked nervously into her cup "They have normal names. Mine is different."

Belladonna chuckled. True hobbit lasses had names referring to their well loved flowers, like Lilly, Rosie, Marigold and so forth. "Because my love you are different."
Little Marie glanced about her person. "I don't feel different."

"Oh but you are." Her mother sat next to her and patted her curls. "Ordinary names inspire ordinary folk. But different ..." Belladonna stroked her rosy cheek. "Different inspires curiosity, creativity, adventure."

"All with just my name Mammy?" Marie frowned."

"Names have power sweet one. One day you will understand the strange beauty of just being different."

Did Belladonna know just how different her daughter would be from all the rest? She who had spoken with the noble elves, faced down nightmarish beasts, made riddles with a dragon and overcame her fear of spiders in the most extreme way possible. Marie rolled onto her side and used an arm to prop up her head. She closed her eyes. In all her time on the road she barely thought to comprehend what she had accomplished. It was a marvel really, discounting the amount of peril she found herself in.

She pulled the blanket back to let herself out. The lack of noises around her indicated only one thing, that it was time. Her body moved of its own volition and she rose from the bed. It was hard to stop the slouch of her shoulders as she made her way to the gates where no doubt the dwarves were waiting for an attack that would not come. She eventually made it to the gates and the company was poised ready and waiting, stretched out along the barricade. They needn't know she was there with them ... not yet. Beyond the wall of stone Marie could hear a rhythmic beat of armored bodies.

The elves were on the move.

As Marie turned to take the second lot of stairs her heart began to beat harder in her chest and seeing Thorin when she made it to the top cause her stomach to clench painfully. He was wearing a traditional dwarvish crown on his brow and is black fur cloak over his armor. The whole company was dressing in armor, some carrying it better than others. Poor Ori was practically drowning in his.

Without disturbing anyone Marie slipped in behind Bofur, who still wore his trademark hat. From over his shoulder Marie had a clear view of the massive army assembled bellow, mostly consisting of the elves and a hundred or so of the people of Laketown.

The elves parted along the middle to let Thranduil and Bard pass on their mounts, but while Bard rode a horse the Elven King sat atop a large elk of sorts, its antlers spanning across a few feet more than Marie had ever seen on an animal.

But before Thranduil or Bard get closer an arrow was shot at the ground near the elk's hooves. Marie looked over at Thorin who had a bow in hand and was readying another arrow.

"I will put the next one between your eyes!" He barked out, which was followed by the dwarves shouting and rattling their weapons in proud response. Marie gulped and watched how Thranduil would respond to the threat. Without a signal or verbal command from him, the first five rows of elves all drew and aimed hundreds of their own arrows. That promptly stopped the dwarves who ducked behind the wall.

All but Thorin. Brave and stubborn as ever he kept aim.

After a tense few seconds Thranduil raised a hand and his forces stood down. "We have come to
tell you that payment for your debt has been offered, and accepted." The elf said.

"I gave you nothing. You have nothing." Thorin countered.

Thranduil just looked to Bard and nodded. Marie sucked in a breath as Bard reached into his jacket. There was a steady sting of gasps along the wall as Bard raised his hand, the light of the Arkenstone pouring out between his fingers. "We have this."

Bofur turned to Nori at his side. "But how?" He muttered, unaware of the hobbit behind them shrinking ever so slightly. She monitored Thorin's reaction but the dwarf did not speak, only lowered his bow with his eyes fixed on the jewel.

"How came you by the heirloom of our house?!" Fili called out from Thorin's side. "That stone belongs to the King."

"The King may have it with our good will. But first, he must honor his word."

Kili, who stood at Thorin other side, glanced down at his shoulder with pained realization. He caught sight Marie. His eyes were full of that same sad regret from before, only the knowledge that she gone through with it made it worse on both their parts. Kili's attention was pulled away from Marie as Thorin tilted his head to the side. "They are taking us for fools." He muttered to his kin, "This is a ruse. A filthy lie."

Marie was unsure if Thorin legitimately did not believe it was the real Arkenstone of was in complete denial. Either way it was complicating negotiations. "The Arkenstone is in this mountain!" He roared at Thranduil and Bard. "It is nothing but a trick!"

"It's no trick."

No more hiding now.

"The stone is real. I gave it to them."

Marie refused to look anywhere but at Thorin for if she glanced at any of the others she may have cracked. Thorin was slow to face her, agonizingly so, the bow in his hand slipped down as his hand grew slack. "You ... You would steal from me?" His voice was so soft it was almost inaudible.

"It was not a decision I made lightly." Marie said. "I am willing to let the stone stand against my claim."

"Against your claim? Your claim ..." Thorin threw his bow to the ground with such force it split in two. "You have no claim over me you miserable wretch!"

Marie flinched and stepped back, but her gaze did not falter. "I wanted to give it to you. Many times I almost did, but ..."

"But what, Thief?"

"I promised to return the Arkenstone to Thorin Oakenshield, not to the dwarf now before me." A surge of bravery filled Marie, and suddenly there was only her and Thorin. No one else, not the elves below and their King, not Bard and his people, not the dwarves whose gazes bounced between the two. "You are changed. The Thorin I met back in Bag End would have never gone back on his word, or would have doubt the loyalty of his kin for an instance."

"Do not ... " He snarled like a wounded dog, "Speak to me ... of loyalty." His eyes were narrowed
and Marie was shocked to see a thin build up of tears refusing to fall. The look of pure heartbreak. "Throw her from the rampart!"

Her bravado ran thin and she waited for the inevitable. But nothing came, no hands around her arms or push towards the wall. Marie looked around. None of the dwarves moved. When they didn't respond, Thorin yanked at Fili, "Did you not hear me!?" But his nephew pulled away, refusing his command one more. A hand touched Marie's shoulder and she immediately tensed up. It was Bofur, but his grip was one of reassurance.

"Then I will do it myself!"

The next few moments were a loud whirlwind of movement and noise to Marie. Hands seizing her and pulling in all sorts of direction, being dragged towards the edge, various cries and pleas. When her back hit the wall she heard Thorin's raspy voice screaming over her as she was hoisted up higher. With one more good push she would have gone over."Curse you! Curse be the wizard that force you upon this company!" Something fell on Marie's cheek, something wet that rolled across her cold face.

"If you don't like my burglar then please, don't damage her! Return her to me."

'Damn it Gandalf.'

Why must his timing be so last minute? Marie opened her eyes. The dwarf's face was twisted with anger, lips pulled back to show his gritted teeth. Slowly his expression fall into vagueness as he came to realize what he was doing and his gazed turned to the wizard somewhere below.

"You're not making a very splendid figure as King Under the Mountain, Thorin Son of Thrain." Gandalf went on to say. The death grip around Marie's coat and the hobbit slipped back and fell at Thorin's feet. Kili and Balin pulled her away from his shoulder his wrath once again turned to her and helped her stand, with Balin taking her hand. Kili went before them to the edge of the wall where he knew she could escape. "Go Marie. Go." Balin whispered and let her go as Kili tossed the rope over the edge. Marie mouthed a thank you as they passed and she climbed over the wall.

"Never again will I have dealings with wizards or Shire rats!"

Thorin's cruel words cut deep. The rope was icy and burned as she scaled down the wall, her chest tight pain as she tried not to slip. She landed on the broken head of the statue used to shatter the causeway and forced herself to stop for a moment and suck in the crisp air. It may have been minutes since she last took a decent breathe.

"Are we resolved then?" Bard's concerned voiced filled the air, "The return of the Arkenstone for what was promise?"

Marie carefully hopped across the debry. A loud cawing made her stop and look up to see a large crow flying towards the gate. Her name was called by the waiting wizard who ushered her into the safety of his robes once she crossed.

"Give us your answer! Will you have peace or war!?"

Nothing came from above. Marie dared a glance up and saw Thorin hunched over with his hands practically clawing the stone as he stared at the crow perched on the ledge.

'I know that bird ...'

By the time Marie could remember why it was too late. From over the western horizon a noise like
"Iron Foot." Gandalf said and changed his grip on his staff. The elves immediately went into action and Thranduil ordered a new formation in their ranks. Gandalf was on the move too. "Keep close Marie." He adjusted his robes so that he could move quicker and Marie running to keep up and to avoid being trampled on by a hundred elves.

"Gandalf who are they? And... who's that?" She panted. At the forefront of the new army there was a single rider holding a war hammer up in the air.

"That is Dain, Lord of the Iron Hills. He is Thorin's cousin."

"His cousin?"

"Yes. Thorin most likely sent word of the mountain's recapture to him and now the Iron Foot clan is flocking to his call." Gandalf explained.

"Is he going to be a problem?"

"Of the two, I personally have found Thorin the more reasonable."

That couldn't be good for anyone.

Though the dwarves were still less in numbers Marie knew who they fought knew how well they could fight as a unit as she had seen thirteen could take on three trolls. The dwarves come to a halt at the base of the hill while the elves and men braced themselves. Marie found herself surrounded by the people of Laketown with Gandalf.

"Good Morning. How are we all?" The armoured boar Dain was riding snorted loudly at the dwarf's somewhat pleasant greeting. His voice was gravely and he had the similar accent to Dwalin and Balin. "I have a wee proposition for you, if you wouldn't mind giving me a few moments of your time."

Marie raised an eyebrow.

"Would ya consider... JUST SODDING OFF! All of you right now!"

'Ah, that's what Gandalf meant.'

The dwarf lord's threat made only the mortal men step back in alarm with Bard calming for them to stand their ground. Gandalf waved Marie away from him, a sign for her to stay back as he entered the tense space between the two opposing forces.

"Come now Lord Dain!"

"Gandalf the Grey." He did not sound pleased to see the wizard. "Tell this rabble to leave or I'll water the ground with their blood."

Just as charming as Thorin it would seem with the diplomacy.

"There is no need for war between elves, men and dwarves. A legion of orcs on the move, stand your army down."

"I will not stand down before any elf. Not lest this faithless woodland sprite." Dain gestured his
hammer at Thranduil. "He wishes nothing but ill will upon my people. If he chooses to stand between me and my kin, I'll split his pretty head open! See if he's still smirking then!"

Marie grimaced. It didn't help that the company cheered from the wall and Thranduil was actually smirking at the threat.

"He's clearly mad, like his cousin." The elf said. As he did the ground started to tremble. Marie looked down at her feet as it slowly intensified and only she was noticing. "Ugh ... Gandalf?"

Dain kicked his boar's side and called to his men, "Ya hear that lads? We're on! Let's give these bastards a good hammering!"

The dwarves started to beat their shields and chanting in their native tongue and the elves pointed their own spears from behind gilded shields, archers poised with itchy fingers. Marie stumbled out of the crowd and went to the wizard.

"Gandalf."

"Not now Marie, I am a bit preoccupied." The wizard was thoroughly exacerbated and was twisting every which way. But Marie persisted.

"Gandalf! The ground." She yanked on his sleeve. Gandalf opened his mouth to speak but he began to feel it too. He twisted his staff into the dirt. The shaking grew worse until all began to notice it. A great crunching sound silenced the two armies and it was like the earth was groaning in pain.

"It's not possible. How did Azog acquire them unless ..."

"What? What is it ... oh my." Marie

It was like several explosions had gone off, chunks of rock and dirt flying through the air. Large heads with nothing but teeth and tusk emerges from the mess and cracked boulders in mouths with a sharp twist. Shrieking and wailing

"Were-Worms." Gandalf gasped.

"If those are worms, I'm an empress." Marie knew it was poor form to be making such remarks but in the face the unbelievable it was all she could do. A sharp brass of a horn cut the winds, sending a shiver of fear down Marie's spine as she whipped around to find the source of the noise. The Were-Worms retreated back into the giant holes and another fanfare echoed out, accompanied by a slow but steady beat of a war drum.

Azog the Defiler had launched his first attack.
"Death comes to all."

Oh how those now held too much truth for Marie to believe. She wanted to run as fast as she could to escape it, hide from it, anything to deny the inevitable battle now. The earth was still trembling from the initial attack from the Were-Worms when the first of the orcs flooded out from the giant holes. Their armor was black and jagged like a beetle or a cockroach, their spears wrapped in thorns and ripped black flags.

The first to act were the Iron Foot, who rallied after Dain charging towards the tide of orcs. "The hordes of Hell are upon us! To battle! To battle sons of Durin!" He yelled fiercely and without hesitation. As the dwarves charged, Marie was pulled by Gandalf into the somewhat safety of the human forces. Gandalf pushes his way to Bard with Marie at his heels. "Bowman." He called. Bard was pulling his steed's reins firmly as the animal pawed at the ground like it was about to take flight. He looked down at the wizard expectantly. Before Marie knew it she had been hoisted off the ground by Gandalf. "Keep her safe. That much you can do for me." He was giving Bard little choice on the matter and had already handed the hobbit to him, seating her in front of him on the saddle. "I have your word?" Gandalf asked.

"Aye, you do."

Once he was sure Marie was secure Gandalf made his way into the ranks of the elves. Thranduil had given no orders and his army remained still even as the dwarves made their stand. Bard wrapped an arm protectively around her as the horse jostled beneath them. "I've got you lass. You're safe now."

Marie knew he wasn't referring to being on the horse but all the same was glad for the comfort wrapped a small hand around his forearm. "The elves." She muttered. "Will they not fight?"

"That is for Thranduil to determine."

"Will you not?" Marie looked up to the man and saw the twisted apprehension on his face.

"I never intended for my people to fight, not monster like those."

The howling of the approaching orcs grew more frantic as they gained speed on the dwarves, who had formed a defensive wall with their shields. Gandalf yelled over the sea of elves for Thranduil to do something but Marie couldn't see the elf's face for his back was to the dwarves.

He could not be so heartless as to let the dwarves stand alone against such a force?

Happily Marie was wrong this time, for with a swift motion of his hand a hundred of his elves broke from the masses. Their speed was unlike anything Marie had seen. Using the dwarves defensive line, the elves leapt and struck the orcs from above, cutting them down like paper. Marie and the Lake Men stared in fear if the orcs and awe at the dwarves and elves combating them, thought the noise of the clashing blades and grinding metals made Marie's ears cringe even at a distance. She wished she could look over at the gates of Erebor, if only to see if Thorin and the company would join their brethren.

Another horn blast came from the air and more orcs appeared out of the holes, this time with trolls, lots and lots of trolls. Though these were not like the trolls from the East Road for they moved freely in the light. Marie noticed that some had what looked like trebuchets strapped to their
hunched backs, the rest were dressed in full battle armour. Where was the horn coming from?

Marie looked about where she could and soon spotted what she wanted. On the highest point of Ravenhill there was hastily constructed flag pole with several different types of coloured panels that where pulled into certain shapes. 'So that's how the orcs know what to do.' It looked maned by only a handful of orcs and Marie was sure that Azog was up there giving the commands. Thanduil galloped over to Bard, the Lake Men parting in his way, "Take you people back to the city. There are more of the vile creatures to come."

No sooner had Thranduil delivered his warning the orcs were on the move. Half the enemy's force turned and began to march on the eastern wall of Dale. The arm around Marie tensed when Bard saw what they were planning. The women and children were still in the city. "All of you! Fall back to Dale." He shouted over the battle. "Hold on Marie." He slapped the reigns fiercely and the startled horse took off in a gallop with Marie barely grabbing hold of the saddle pommel in time, with the hobbit casting a last look at the mountain to whisper something.

"Thorin."

~*~

Someone was calling his name. Here? Or from far away? It did not matter. Thorin sat deeper into the throne, the armour he was still wearing kept him grounded in the ancient seat. He had to think of a plan, a good plan. The victor of the battle would turn their forces on the mountain, to his gold, and would take it if they dared.

The answer eluded him, tauntingly so.

Safe. Where was safe? No one could be trusted anymore.

The stone was cold under his fingers despite the lit braziers not far from Thorin, but it was a dim light in the cavern that was the Throne Room. Never before had is been so dark, so different. Where was the sunlight's beams, that which made the stone shine bright?

"Thorin."

It was hard to look up for his eyelids felt heavy like he lacked sleep. He did not need it, though he could not recall the last time he had slept.

"Since when do we forsake our own people?" Dwalin stormed up the steps towards Thorin with a fierce step in his stride. He had removed the battle armour. "Thorin. They're dying out there."

Dain's forces were losing. No, no, no this would not do. The elves, orcs, all of them want whats theirs. "There are halls beneath halls within this mountain." Thorin mumbled on, "Places we can fortify. Shore up make safe, yes." He dragged himself up as the answer finally came to him. "We must move the gold further underground to safety."

"Did you not hear me?" Dwalin growled as Thorin paced around his throne. The warrior caught his arm but quickly pulled away when Thorin turned back to him with a pointed stare. "Dain is surrounded. They're being slaughtered Thorin."

"Many die in war." Said Thorin, his voice devoid of feeling. "Life is cheap. But a treasure such as
this can not be counted in lives lost." Why could he not see? Dwalin. Why? He knew of the glory Erebor once held and could be once again. "It is worth all the blood we can spend."

But Dwalin did not see. He shook his head at what Thorin had said with an almost pitiful look. He pitied him. "You sit here in these vast halls with a crown upon your head, and yet you are lesser know than you have ever been." Though he sounded pitiful, his words cut the dwarf deep.

He dare think him less than what he was. He was the blood of Durin. He was ... better. He was not weak, not like ...

"Marie was right. You can not see what you've become," Dwalin said.

"Never ... say that name before me. Not EVER!" Thorin's teeth ground together. "She betrayed us. She chose the elves she loves so much and ..."

"She did it to save you Thorin. It takes a strong resolve to do what she did."

He would not be spoken down to, never again. "Do not speak to me as if I was some lowly dwarf lord." Thorin staggered back as his mind reeled against him. He could hear her voice in his head as she declared to the world he was not himself. "As if ... I was ... still ... Thorin Oakenshield ..." He pressed his shaking fingers to his brow where his crown cut into his skin.

He was Thorin, son of Thrain, son of Thror ... Who was Thorin Oakenshield? A prince? A blacksmith? A no one? His head pounded painfully in his skull.

It hurt.

Everything hurt.

"I AM YOUR KING!"

Thorin draw his sword and cut the air wildly and almost threw himself over the ledge. He was seeing red everywhere. There was no trust, no trust at all. All betray, all take for you, no one can be trusted.

"You were always my king."

Thorin's chest heaved as he fought the many thoughts in his head. Dwalin took a careful step towards him. "You used to know that once."

"Go. Get out. Before I kill you." Thorin pleaded, his vision blurred with shameful tears of weakness. He slouched as the left side of his body became too heavy and caught himself on the throne.

He was alright.

He didn't need anyone.

Anyone.

Dwalin was still speaking, repeating himself over and over. Why couldn't he just leave him alone? He snapped his head up and was about to tell him so but Dwalin was gone.

His words lingered though, intertwining with those his brother had said to him by the Hidden Door. Like threads they twisted and knotted around one another until Thorin could not tell where one thought started and another ended, tangling with old unwanted memories of doubts both his and
His hand moved of its own accord and let his sword fall to his feet, reaching behind one of his gauntlets to find the small button he had kept on his person. It had been gift, given in a make believe courtship with a light hearted smile. It was fool's hope that it meant anything. Thorin closed his fist around it and raised his arm up, ready to hurl the blasted thing away from him and be rid of her nonsensical hobbit luck. But despite his shaking hand and steely mind set he could not throw it into the cavern below. With each breath in the voices grew louder and faded into frantic whispers as he breathed out.

He thought walking would ease the sounds but it was folly. He could not walk away from his own mind. He walked until he found himself in the center of the Hall of Kings and its new golden floor. The liquid had long since cooled and hardened once again now giving the massive space a constant glow. The metal of Thorin's boots gave a muted echo with each step. Thorin stopped and looked about at the gold floor.

He was being watched.

Where are they? Where are the traitors that wish to kill him? He would kill them before …. Marie was standing before him, clear as the very sun in the sky. She couldn't …. She shouldn't be here. Her green eyes shone with her sheer determination. So brave and yet so foolish. She lifted her hands and drew closer to him. Thorin wanted to move away from her outstretched fingers else he might take them and crush her small bones. He recalled the memory of his fingertips brushing over his cheeks with fear and pleasure, even closing his eyes at the sensation.

'You are changed.'

He opened his eyes and found her gone.

Something moved beneath him and Thorin caught sight of a long tail skimming through the gold like it was water. Thorin staggered and turned about himself to watch the tail disappear deeper into the floor. Smaug.

The voices were more persistent with their torment and even his own words were turning on him. Was there anything in this world that would not betray him? They circled around him, as the gold circle around him growing higher and higher.

He was drowning.

He yanked the crown off his head and tossed it away. There was once again air in his lungs and for the first time in what seemed like a lifetime he felt weightless.

He was free.

He was himself.

He was …. He was sure of what he had to do.
"Ghaaaaa!" It was less than mighty battle cry but it was all Marie could muster as she hacked at the orc's shins or any part of the monster's anatomy. The battle had spread into Dale and those who had avoided the conflict before now had little choice than to either flee into the derelict ruins or fight back by any means. Marie had lost Bard quite early for he went in blindly searching for his children after leaving her in what he had assumed to be a safe location. It was not safe for long as the trolls broke done the walls and more orcs entered the city. Gandalf found her in time trailing behind a squad of archers, huffing his complaints as he pulled her in to his side.

"Keep me sight and keep your sword up Marie." He instructed her.

So she did, wounding the enemy in the legs while Gandalf finished them off. For an old man he fought like a spritely young warrior and Marie would have never guessed him to have such skill. The Lake Men fought bravely to push the orcs out to the northern quarter of Dale and away from the Great Hall where the children and injured were hiding. All the while that damned horn up on Ravenhill kept blasting out and Marie kept glancing up to see the flag system where Azog were watching it all unfold without lifting a finger.

Marie staggered back as Gandalf panted his staff into the ground and growled something in a strange tongue. The snow swirled around the staff before there was a burst of air, which sent seven orcs flying back.

"Gandalf?" Marie jumped up and rushed to the wizard's side. He was swaying and was breathing heavily.

"Quite alright Marie, quite alright." He shook his head and straightened his back.

"Didn't know you could do that." Marie padded her face with the back of her sleeve. "A trick like that could really be useful a while ago."

"I wouldn't be much of a wizard if I couldn't perform a simple 'trick' like that."

Another bang went off in the distance as another part of the city was knocked down. Marie wondered how long they could keep this up. The Iron Foot army had been cut off from the elves as more orcs arrived and almost all of the escape routes out of Dale had been over run.

"Gandalf, why don't you use your magic to …?"

"No Marie." Gandalf said quickly. "My powers are spent. If I attempt anything drastic now I may …" An orc jumped out from a crack and tried to swipe at Gandalf but the wizard batted him away with his sword and crack his staff over its head.

"Then what can we do?" This was too much for hobbit. Marie stuck Sting into the throat of a fall orc still in its death throes with great gusto, only to be struck across the cheek by its fist. She promptly slump against a rock, sweat dripped down her nose that left frozen steaks on her dirty and
bloodied skin. On top of the punch she had been kicked several times that her hips were sure to be yellow and black. She wanted to stop, but if she did she would be killed.

'If only the dwarves were here ....'

Marie's ears pricked up as another fanfare sounded but there was something different about the sudden horn blast. It rumbled in the air and sunk into the earth and Marie's bones, like hearing a familiar tune after so many years. In her heart she knew what that horn meant and she scrambled to her feet with renewed faith. The battle out on the field increased in volume as the tide began shifting and Marie ran out onto a parapet to see it with her own eyes with Gandalf close on her heels. The dwarven forces that had been backed against the Gates of Erebor were charging forward to break through the black army of orcs.

"The dwarves. They're rallying!" Marie was smiling like Gandalf.

"They're rallying to their king." He said. Marie could feel every part of her body fill with air as she took an elated breath in and hope bloomed again in her heart, the fatigue was a forgotten thing.

"Come Marie. Come! We may yet survive this." Gandalf was off again to help push back the orcs but Marie wanted to see how the battle would shift completely in favour for their side. One can not ignore a wizard's command so easily so she followed on into the fighting. The elves were falling back to the higher levels presumably to take the advantage point before it was taken by the orc archers. It left the Lake Men to maintain their slim hold on the reclaimed levels, the corpses littering the streets was proof of it. Marie tried to catch sight of the dwarves below but she was too small to see over the walls. She wanted to see them again. See her friends and ...

"He's taken his best fighters."

"What? Gandalf?"

The wizard was staring off towards the frozen waterfall near Ravenhill. "It's Thorin. He is heading towards ... ah yes."

"What Gandalf? Tell me!" Marie grabbed at his sleeves and tugged hard. She had not the eyes of a wizard to see that far nor his height. "Where is he going?"

"To cut off the head of the snake itself."

Marie looked to Ravenhill and understood. "Azog."

"Yes. He has Dwalin, Fili and Kili at his side. And without their commander ..."

"Gandalf watch out!" Marie pointed to his right as a great big mass of an orc came barrelling towards them. No sooner had she shouted an arrow settled itself between its eyes and it fell to the ground with a crash. "Gandalf!" Marie and the wizard turned in the direction the arrow came from to see just who had shot it. Two elves on horseback came galloping up the hill through the battle, both whom Marie recognized. It was that fair haired elf with Orcrist and the captain, Tauriel if Marie remembered correctly. They had been noticeably absent from the whole ordeal before the battle.

"Legolas Greenleaf." Gandalf rushed towards the elf as he dismounted the horse.

"There is a second army. Bolg leads of force of Gundabad. There are almost upon us."

"Gundabad?"
Legolas nodded and the wizard's knuckles around his staff turned white. "This was their plan all along. Azog engages our forces then Bolg sweeps in from the North." Gandalf said through his teeth.

"What? The North? Bolg? Whose Bolg?" Marie rattled on and paced across the wizard impatiently. "Isn't Ravenhill in the ..." The answer came to her with all the grace of a sledgehammer and left her feeling just as stable. Thorin was up there. Kili, Fili and Dwalin too.

"It would seem that the snake remained in its cave for a reason." Gandalf said. The two elves glanced at one another. "What is Gandalf?" Legolas asked.

"Go before your father. Have him dispatch a force to Ravenhill to secure it. That might delay Bolg ..."

"There were too many to count Mithrandir." The red haired captain shook her head. "A single battalion will not slow them."

"They have to know." Marie managed to choke out. "They have to be warned ... the trap." She was already moving.

Gandalf caught her shoulder tightly. "And where are you running off too?"

"I thought that was obvious, to warn Thorin."

"Are you mad Marie?"

"I'm half Took, so yes. Now let me go." She wriggled until she slipped free of his hand. The elf Legolas watched her with a perplexed look. "You wouldn't make or of the city, let alone anywhere near the watch tower." He stated in a matter of fact way that made Marie turn her green gaze on him.

"I can make it past the eyes of an elf easy enough." She snapped. "I can make it there in time to warn them without any orcs seeing me."

"No." Gandalf reached out to catch her again but she skittered away. "It is too dangerous. I've already put you in harm's way and I will not allow this."

"I'm not asking you too Gandalf." Marie was off and running before Gandalf could respond and before she even had a plan in mind. It was only when she was stopped by the wall of orcs did she figure it best to stop and think. She ducked behind a pillar and out of sight, swapping her filthy sword for her magic ring and, with a deep breath in, slipped it onto her finger. She wasted no time to be overwhelmed by its magic and braved her way through the fighting. It was hard tell just who was fighting who, all that could be made out were lights and shadows moving about one another and avoided both in her haste. In an odd way she was grateful now to the orcs and their troll for smashing down parts of the western walls, making her escape out of the city easier than risking the overrun drawbridge. The hobbit slid down the remnants of the wall into the dried up mot below but tripped and tumbled over her head. She groaned and picked herself up quickly.

It was a risk going to warn Thorin of this new army but one Marie felt she had to take. He may hate her now, despise her even, but she wouldn't stand back and let him be overwhelmed by the enemy. And so she ran with all her might up the mout and across the plains, ignoring the pain her whole body was in. Her chest was tightening with each step and she couldn't stop her ragged yelps. As Marie crossed the frozen river she slid across it dangerously, leaving behind bloody footprints on the ice. All that was left was the cliff. Marie twitched her nose and gripped the rock face and
started climbing. Not as easy as trees are but Marie still speed up the cliff while listening out for any sounds above her that may have been the swords clashing. A gush of wind pushed her off balance and almost carried her away. "Buggery bugger." The hobbit gritted her teeth and regained her footing on the icy rocks.

There was a squeal above her as an orc was flung over the top of the cliff and hurtled down towards the ground below. This only prompted Marie to go faster. The muscles between her shoulders burned like an open flame down her back, but that did not matter.

She was close now.

"Come on Marie, come ... on just ... a little ... more."

At last her fingers clawed at the worn stone bricks of the watch tower and Marie puller herself up and onto the ledge. It was a good thing that she held as tightly as she did or she would have plummeted onto a staircase ten feet below.

Marie balanced herself and ran along the ledge until the steps were close enough to jump onto. The stairs took her into a dark tunnel she remembered from the first time they came here and followed it along expecting to reach the banks of the waterfall, pulling off the ring in the process to ease the last leg of her journey. The doorway ahead of her was filled with a dull white light as the wind bought a cold fog over the ruins, but through the swirling snow there were two figures pacing across the door and the growling voice Marie could detect could be none other than Dwalin. And where there was Dwalin there was ...  

"Thorin!"

Marie skidded to a halt not five feet from Thorin and the apprehension of facing him again hit her senses. He wanted her dead last time he saw her, and as far as their current standing was she was still a traitor. He had a sword out which made Marie weary.

He turned and saw her.

Marie waited for the fury.

All she saw was relief was over his face. "Marie." Then came hesitation. He looked to be holding himself back from going to her. By now Dwalin had also noticed her sudden appearance.

"Lass? Where did you ...?"

"You have to leave here now. Azog has another army, coming up from the north. This place will be overrun and we have no time left." Once she had spat out all that need to be said she took a generous intake of air to kick her lungs back into action.

Dwalin and Thorin glance at each other then back at Marie. "You're sure of this." Thorin asked.

"Yes quite ..." Marie sucked in a breath. "Quite sure. Now please we have to ... Where are Fili and Kili?" She looked all around but could not find the brothers. She was sure Gandalf had said they were with Thorin.

"We are so close. That orc scum is in there. I say we push on." Dwalin brought his axe up and turned to the tower. Thorin caught his friend's shoulder. "No. That's what he wants, to draw us in. This is a trap."

So that is what Gandalf had meant. Azog had set himself up as both bait and the hunter for the
dwarves and they had taken it.

"Find Fili and Kili, call them back." Thorin ordered his old friend. He seemed like himself again, even looking as he was on the long journey to the mountain. In control but cautious, prouder now without all his finery and crown. It suited him to be this way.

"Thorin, are you sure?"

"Do it. We live to fight another day."

Dwalin nodded and made for the stairs that would take him closer to the icy surface bellow. "Be careful." Marie said regardless if he would hear, but Thorin did. He looked to her again and they regarded each other in silence. They both knew that this wasn't the time or place for further arguments or repentance and Marie simply dropped her gaze. She heard his boot scuff across the stone as she turned back to the tunnel.

A powerful boom reverberated under Marie's feet and up her spine. It sounded like a drum had been struck under the earth and at first Marie thought it had been an explosion off in the distance, until it struck again. This time it sounded much closer and was coming from the tower. Thorin and Marie moved in unison towards the now steady drum beat as lights flickered from the shadows, trailing higher and higher to the broken top of the tower were the fog gathered in a cloud. Marie squinted and she thought she could make out a tall figure moving out of the fog. Her guts twisted when the figure became more visible.

It was Azog. And he wasn't alone. Half a dozen black armoured orcs lingered behind him baring torches. Thorin quite visibly tensed up and rushed to the edge of the ruin and Marie followed him.

Azog was dragging something along behind him, something alive and struggling against the orc's hold. Marie swallowed hard as her fears came to light before her and well out of reach of her to stop. Another wave of movement caught her attention further down the tower, a single being poking out of a doorway. It was Kili, alone.

"Oh, please. Let it not be ..."

The Pale Orc raised his good arm up and lifted a squirming body up by the scruff of his neck. Marie made a small noise in the back of her throat and she stepped towards the edge blindly, stopping when Thorin's arm shot out to catch her.

Azog forced Fili to face his uncle, to show off how utterly helpless they both were. The young dwarf was bruised and bloodied all over his face and hair which made Marie clutch Thorin's arm tightly. Azog poised his other arm at Fili's back, which now had a large blade attached to the stump rather than the twisted metalwork he sported in his last appearance. "This one dies first. Then, the brother. Then you, Oakenshield. You die last."

Thorin was shaking, Marie could feel it against her body. She quickly looked up at him to see his pained expression. There was nothing he could do to stop it and was killing him slowly. Marie then looked to see if Kili was still hidden below, watching in pure horror as Fili dangled overhead.

Fili feebly moved his mouth up and down, forming silent words. A cry for help or a last curse at Azog? Then, as Azog pull his arm back, one word escaped in a great desperate cry. "RUN!"

The blow was harsh, bloody and Marie felt as if she too had been stabbed. Her knees buckled and all that was keeping her up was Thorin's own slack hold. He made a sound that was akin to having the air in the lungs being sucked out as Fili gave a final jolt before going limp.
"Here ends you filthy bloodline, Oakenshield!"

The orc released his hold on Fili's body and let it fall, a final stroke to his brutal murder, topped only with the fact that Fili's body landed right before his little brother's hiding place. Not even a second passed before Kili roared and ran blindly back into the ruin with bloody vengeances, straight into the waiting lackeys of Azog. His own shouts were soon drowned out by snarls and shrieks.

"No Kili! Wait!" Marie lurched forward even with Thorin pulling her away. Azog stared down at them, challenging Thorin to do something before fading back into the fog and the dark ruin. The female hobbit both pulled against Thorin and held onto him, her body not in accordance with distressed mind and her breath made ragged noises no different to a sob. Thorin called Dwalin back and hands her to him with new orders to watch her before storming off, screaming Kili's name. Dwalin did not hold Marie and followed after his friend which left Marie alone for a moment.

She cupped her mouth to muffle the strange cries she was making.

Fili. Faithful, proud Fili. Dead. Murdered before her eyes. And Kili, sweet boy with so much hope, just throwing himself into danger and could possibly ...

The grief hit her with such violence she felt physically ill.

'Now just ... alright just breath Marie ... Marie get a hold of yourself. Now is not ... oh heavens Fili.'

Once Marie gained some form of composure yet another challenge presented itself. She heard it first before she saw it, the flapping of multiple wings on the cold wind before horrible lanky birds burst through the fog and passed over the ruins and past Marie. She shrieked and ducked to dodge the leathery birds, soon realising that they were not birds but bats.

They took no notice of her and kept on track towards Dale.

The ogrish brutes that followed after the massive flock however, did.

They climbed up over the walls with such speed Marie had no time to move herself into action as they got closer, milky white eyes honed in on her and her helplessness.

"Duck!"

Marie hit the ground fast as Dwalin's axe passed overhead and sliced through the nearest orc's head. It was best not to question where and when only be thankful that he was here now. Marie grabbed at a pile of rocks and started doing what she once was best at. Causing trouble. She socked two orcs right in the forehead and another in the throat, leaving it to Dwalin to make the killing blow. Her next two throws were sloppy in comparison, but her rage was getting the better of her as she thought of some colourful insults for the orcs. She took small steps back and hurled stone after stone until to felt her heel hit the rough granite surface of a boulder and she had nowhere to go. One very tall orc, with a scar so wide on his head had metal plates bolted across it, took exception to her small resistance and stalked his way towards her while Dwalin was otherwise distracted. Marie picked up rock after rock but this orc was clearly smarter and batted away the incoming rocks with a deadly looking mace, his no existence nose flaring as he got closer. Marie remembered she had a damn sword and went to unsheathe it but the orc moved swiftly and swung the end of his mace up to hit her, but managed only to cuff her chin as she swayed back, tripping up herself and falling onto the rock pile with a painful thump. A buzzing noise filled her ears and she was acutely away of the pain blooming in the back of her head. Black spots dotted across her vision and she knew she
only had a few precious moments before losing consciousness and the last thing she would see was the orc's horrific face leering down at her.

Why hadn't he killed her yet?

She was completely open and couldn't fight back and all he did was prod at her with the tip of his mace, grunting away to himself. Just as her whole sight went she was yanked up by her wrist and the last thing she registered was the tension crawling up her arm.

Whatever this orc had planned for her, it required her to be alive ... for now.
It was a trap. Nothing could be clearer, yet Thorin still ran head long into it with pure rage fuelling him. He chased the shadows on every stair, around every corner and deeper into the ruin, his sword thirsting for orc blood.

He had to find Kili and get him out.

He shouldn't have sent them in. He should have gone in himself. If only he thought his plan through more thoroughly.

Now was not the time to dwell on regret.

It did not take long before he found Azog, or more accurately, Azog found him. He burst out from above like a charging boar, catching Thorin off guard and putting him of the defensive. With both a blade and a mace to fight with Azog was indeed a force to be reckoned with but for all his size and strength he was slower than the dwarf. Thorin moved quickly to easily parry the orc's onslaught and get in a few blows of his own. His sword cut into the crude pieces of armour Azog had fashioned to his body but twice Thorin landed a hit to his flesh, making the giant snarl in pain.

Good. But Thorin wanted to make him scream in pain, to feel it just as he felt the pain of losing Fili.

He scaled the side of a crumbling wall and brought his sword down hard but Azog blocked at the last minute and used this chance to hurl Thorin towards the platform's edge. The strange shape of the blade sown into Azog's arm caught on Thorin's and in the momentum of it all snapped half the sword off. Thorin landed hard on his side pain as Azog barked out a command and five orcs appeared, whilst he himself slithered back into the shadows.

Thorin grunted and rolled to his good side, but he was greeted to a horrifying sight for any uncle. Kili's arrow riddled body sprawled out unceremoniously on the cold stone, his blank face turned towards Thorin. He reached out feebly but could not bring himself to touch him, not when those once warm brown eyes that had looked up to Thorin his whole life with hope were now forever cold.

Grief swelled inside him until it had churned into anger and Thorin punched the ground viciously, standing himself up again with his side throbbing.

"You bloody coward. FACE ME AZOG!" He screamed to the high heavens. But instead Azog's all too willing battle fodka gladly fought the dwarf, and with each death another orc appeared to take its place. Thorin left his now useless sword in the chest of an orc and took his weapon as his prize, deciding that a full blade was better than a half. He was pushed out of the ruin and back onto the frozen over river where he dug his feet into the ice and the iron cuffs of his boots helped with his grip. The bastard Azog was waiting until Thorin had wasted most of his energy on his minions before daring to show his face again. Too bad for Azog and his pathetic hordes Thorin's rage had no limits and he would pursue the pale Orc to the ends of Middle Earth in the name of vengeance for his family. For his grandfather, for his father. Frerin. Fili. Kili.

'I will avenge you.'

All around there was great crashes and walls being torn down. The new army he had been warned about was surely upon them, if not in full force but in small amounts. Thorin knew the sound of
trolls well enough. The edge of the waterfall was starting to be too close for Thorin's liking, with the right strike he could easily go over, and the orc blade had been force to use was brittle and breaking off with each kill. But the three berserkers facing him were the last of them, and once dead there would be nothing standing between Thorin and Azog. The first two went down easily but succeeded in limiting his space. His final opponent, a black eyed monstrosity, wielded a large metal club larger than its body and used it to great effect to knock Thorin onto his back and in the process dropped his weapon. He swore at the orc in Khuzdul and the orc responded in his own foul tongue before lifting up the club with smug look. If Thorin had his sword he could have gutted him in an instant.

Before the orc has finished lifting the club something flew past Thorin's head and hit the orc square in the ribs, inciting a strangled grunt from the creature. Thorin looked with surprise at the object sticking out of the orc, a very familiar hilt of maple wood and silver. The orc began to fall and Thorin spared no thoughts on where, who and how but dared not lose it again and swiftly clasped the hilt as the creature toppled over the waterfall.

There was a great comfort in the weight of Orcrist again in his hand, the unique shape of the blade catching in the rare sunlight and making it appear that the ancient carvings along its edge were glowing. He moved it with revered purpose as a new energy filled his body. With it he would carve his bloody path to vengeance.

"Now …. come out Azog. No more hiding." He muttered. The fog up ahead cleared and there he was. Thorin advanced towards him with slow steps, moving his sword arm up across his body. Azog remained still, as if waiting for Thorin to come close before beginning their second round. He felt the wind changed and the fog parted over the watch tower to reveal Azog completely.

At his feet there were two objects that Thorin could not immediately make out. It gave him reason to halt. Azog was too calm, tilting his scarred face to the side as the two foes stared each other down. Thorin broke focus when he saw behind them Azog's new army coming over the hill, making its arrival known with a horn blast. The orc smirked when he heard it and reached down with his one good hand. Thorin tensed up, assuming it was a weapon he was reaching for.

What it was something far, far worse.

It was the curls that gave it away, even limp and filthy there was no mistaking them.

Marie.

Thorin's chest tightened and his breath quickened. Marie was held by the scruff of her collar and Azog brought her close to his face to examine her. She dangled like a piece of cloth in Azog's grip as she stood to his full height.

"Soft flesh. And small … so easy to bleed." With just the tip of his blade Azog tilted her chin up.

The rage in Thorin's gut coiled and was joined with a sense of fear at the gesture. "Azog!" He screamed. But the orc only slowly lowered his sword from Marie's face but letting it hover over her heart, a wicked grin formed on his monstrous face and Thorin knew he was exactly where Azog wanted him. Marie began to stir, her head and arms giving off slight twitches.

"Don't …"

"I told you Oakenshield." Azog moved the hobbit out to arm's length, angling her towards Thorin. "You would die last."
Thorin jolted forward, wishing he had the speed of lightning. Marie's head lifted and revealed her drowsy confusion to the situation that soon enough gave way to horror.

"DON'T!"

Azog just snarled and stabbed Marie in the stomach.

The sharp breath she took, a sound that should have been no louder than a pin drop was like a hammer on stone in his ears, stopped Thorin in his tracks. Her bright eyes were wide and her face contorted in what was no doubt agony. Azog then threw her away to the face side of the river.

Threw her away like she was nothing.

Azog had taken her from him.

Thorin's jaw ground together and he was snarling like some animal and this time he charged at Azog, who took great joy in watching him come completely undone. The orc retrieved the second object from his feet, a thick chain with a heavily weighted chunk of stone at one end. A rather crude choice for a second weapon, not that Thorin cared. He was still going to kill him. The power of their swords meeting made the air vibrate, lingering heavily until the next strike. Azog swung his arm back and the stone flew over his shoulder, hitting the ice where Thorin once stood with a crack. Grunting and snarling, Azog pulled the chain and swiped his across himself to try and take off Thorin's head, the weight of the stone forcing him to keep moving in circles. This was a savage dance with little thought or planning, merely the simple raging need to kill the other. The ice beneath their feet was cracking but neither opponent seemed to care. All Thorin saw was blood. Every drop of his loved ones that had been spilt by Azog, every drop of his own her had shed chasing after the beast. He was drowning in red, and soon it would be black.

If he had taken a moment though to note Azog's sword, he would have been surprised to see that blade was clean.

~*~

It hurt … everywhere. It has started in her gut and bloomed outward to the rest of her. Then in her shoulder, a quick yet sharp jolt of pain, then again in her hip. Marie dared not to move in case a single shift would double the pain. Though all the pain clearly meant one answer, she was still alive.

She had a vague memory of what had happened.

She had been caught …. after she hit her head …. 

There were voices … loud like scrapping metal …. And when she opened her eyes she saw …. Thorin standing too far out of reach …

Marie snapped up from the ice. That's right, azog had tried to kill her in front of him. 'Thorin!' She looked around to find him and to see what had happened. Her sight was still off and the colours were muted, but she could still hear shouting. Marie rubbed the heel of her palm into her eyes to hopefully fix them so that she could see. White spots dotted across her vision and left clear patches in her sight until she had regained it completely.
Azog and Thorin were engaged in a fierce battle on the cracked surface of the river and both seemed completely indifferent to the shattered ice they were fighting on, or that they were rocking back and forth on certain pieces. Marie was watching how Thorin tried to goad Azog into making a mistake at the expense of his safety. It was unlike him to fight this. It was too brash, unrefined and angry. It was madness what he was doing and he would fall into the water below and freeze to death before he would see that. With small breaths to avoid anymore pain Marie picked herself up and settled back on her knees, patting herself down frantically.

‘Please be there. Please be there. Yes!’

The orc that had caught her was either overly confident in her helplessness or just downright stupid, since she still had Sting hanging off her hip. Before she unsheathed it she stopped and formed a plan.

She couldn't very well charge out and join the fray with the ice cracked the way it was or she would just fall though, and she was in condition to take on the giant. She could try distracting Azog, stamp her feet and scream so that he turn his back ... and potentially go for her before Thorin could strike. Marie bit her frozen lip.

What to do?

Azog pivoted away from Thorin's swipe and Marie was drawn to his legs, completely bare. She drew Sting and took a very careful aim. If this didn't work she would lose her only means of defense but if it did ...

‘Just throw the damn sword Marie.’

And she did.

She raised her arm back over her head and with all the force she could muster tossed Sting towards Azog and in the process flung herself down into the ice again, breaking her fall with her forearm. The sword spun through the air and landed right where Marie wanted it. The blade cut right through the muscles of Azog’s calf and stayed lodged there as the orc howled and staggered.

While the orc wallowed in his pain Thorin stopped fighting and looked towards where he saw the blade come from.

His face showed three flashes of emotion, one passing as quickly as the other. Astonishment, elation and fear, all in a matter of seconds of catching sight of Marie.

Unfortunately Azog too saw that she was indeed alive and only bothered with one emotion. Pure unadulterated rage.

What followed was a tense moment of waiting for who would move first, a moment that was disrupted by large shadows passing over head and blocking out the sunlight. Marie's eyes shot up in time to see a giant eagle swooping low over Ravenhill, its massive wings almost reaching both sides of the river and carried with it a power blast of wind. It was enough to knock Azog off his weak footing and to his knee and almost blew Thorin over completely.

The eagles had come.

There were many, more so than the convocation that had flown them to Carrock, and were heading straight towards the approaching army with talons aiming low and their screeches loud like a warcry. The orc army was quickly thrown into disarray with most of their forces being picked off or blown away with a beat of a wing.
Marie could only summarize that somehow, someway, this was Gandalf's doing or by some means a meddling wizard.

She pushed herself up onto her hands and knees and looked back at the fight. The strange turn of events must have made Thorin refocus and he used the eagle's distraction to his advantage. With Azog's back turned he dropped his sword and made for Azog's stone stuck in the ice between them. The chain tugged Azog back onto the large piece they had been sliding around on and Thorin tossed him the stone. Stupidly the orc caught it just as Thorin stepped back. Marie watched as the sudden change in weight started to flip the ice and Azog slide back into the deadly cold water, clawing at any solid surface to stop but it was too late.

There was a horrible mixture of his screams and gurgling as the ice had completed its cycle and trapped Azog beneath it.

Marie used the rocks help her get onto her feet, keeping an arm wrapped around her middle to hold in the discomfort as they watched ... waited. Only the ice was moving ever so slightly from the disturbance. Finally the breath they both held was released and Marie dared to look at the dwarf.

He stared back her, watching every tentative step she took around the cracks in utter disbelief. Even as he picked up his sword he never broke eye contact. Something had to said, anything to prove she wasn't some specter.

"Crying shame really." She blurted out and looked away from Thorin. "That was a bloody good sword." Thorin said nothing to her poor humor and Marie still moved closer. "I see you got your sword back. Brilliant. Put it to good ..."

"How?" Thorin suddenly rushed her but stopped short of actually touching her. "I saw the blade ..." His hand hovered over her arm guarding the supposedly fatal wound, waiting for her permission. Marie slipped it away and looked down. There was indeed a cut in her shirt, but when she pulled her coat to the side there was no blood. Thorin's large fingers brushed the torn fabric, his dark brows knitting together as he felt the bumps underneath the fabric. He then reached up and pulled her collar down, which in any other circumstance would have earned him a solid slap, but Marie couldn't be bothered. The collar peeled back to reveal silver embroidery decorating her skin.

"Mithril" Thorin's hand released the fabric of her shirt and sat awkwardly on her shoulder. "I did not think you would have kept it."

"It was a gift." Marie rubbed the spot where Azog's blade had got her. It may not have cut her open but it still hurt. "One that I … I am grateful for." Marie swallowed back what she really wanted to say. "Is he dead?"

Thorin grimaced and glanced at the shattered ice. "None would survive this long in that water. His lungs would have frozen."

"Are you alright?" She asked. He certainly didn't look alright but Maire. He looked like a wild animal caught in a trap, and just as bloodied. Thorin's hand slowly tightened over her shoulder but not in a threatening manner, more of a means to reassure himself she was standing before him. Out of instinct to offer comfort, Marie places her hand over his sword hand, curling her aching fingers around the grip he had on Orcrist.

Somehow this was all that she needed to do. Thorin said nothing but tension around his eyes drew back and his demeanor softened. The hand that had gripped her shoulder moved to hold the back of her neck gently, his thumb brushing off a layer of dirt along her jaw. He bent his head down, Marie closed her eyes and lent into his touch. The heat of Thorin's forehead drove the cold out of her skin.
as he pressed their heads together. He started to mutter a long string of dwarven words. The air surrounding them felt so calm, Marie breathed it in heavily. Under her fingers Thorin's sword hand suddenly flexed and pulled out from her touch, indicating something was not right. Marie opened her eyes to see what was wrong, to see if she had done something she shouldn't have. Thorin's attention had been pulled from her and slowly his whole body turned away. He was watching the growing disarray of the second army. "Come, we must find Dwalin." He said and adjusted his hold on her. "I need to get you somewhere safe."

Marie nodded. Instinctively she reached up and grabbed the hand he had on her shoulder and latched onto his gauntlet as they begun to move. They weren't quite holding hands but Thorin still let his arm fall behind him for her, taking the lead back to the other side of the river while keeping an eye out ahead. Marie watched their backs.

Neither of them thought to look below.

It was like an explosion had gone off and they were both thrown back. Marie lost her grip on Thorin's arm and slipped on the snow onto her backside. Once the word stopped spinning she called out to Thorin but he didn't respond. By the time she had sat up the dwarf was already fending off the cause of the sudden attack, a very much alive Azog.

He was beating Thorin into the ground till he was on his back with no chance to gain an upper hand, not with Azog lashing out widely. Marie shot up to her feet and ran around the fight, acting in the moment rather than planning like she did before. There was no time. Sting was still lodged in the thick skin of his leg and that's what Marie aimed for, thinking that Azog was too distracted to notice. But she was just inches from the sword's hilt when Azog turned his focus on her and struck out. His large hand cuffed her shoulder and knocked her off balance, her arms waving about to regain herself but Azog snatched her up by her wrist. This did not stop her from fighting back as he lifted her up off her feet.

Azog had them both caught. Thorin on his back and Marie in the air, trapped with no way out. The orc was pushing down hard on the lock Thorin had gotten their swords in while slowly tightening his grip on Maire. She gritted her teeth to hold back any yelps of pain out of spite. She would not give the orc the satisfaction of her tears. He would however have her screams. All it took was a sharp twist and pain exploded under her skin, her voice pitching high like a birds. This made Maire doubled her efforts and scratched and kicked at Azog's pale flesh, overwhelmed by the 'fight of flight' instincts coursing through her. The hobbit glanced down at Thorin, fresh beads of sweat building on his forehead as he fought against Azog's strength.

His eyes met her's.

Every encounter that had passed between them flashed across Marie's memories. Their strange introduction at her front door, the first cold night in Beorn's garden, Laketown, the confrontation at the gates of Erebor. Encounters both harsh and sweet.

Thorin's jaw locked and there was a decisive shift in his gaze. He was about to do something. He turned his eyes to Azog with all the determination of three men in one and Marie knew with a sickening realization what he was planning.

'Don't you dare Thorin. Don't!'

Everything moved in slow motion, the blades sparking off one another as Thorin slid Orcrist out and away. Azog released Marie by accident as his full weight fell forward and Marie fell shoulder first onto the ice. The thud echoed about her like a blizzard in her ears along with a loud strained gasp, but not her own.
Thorin had let Azog stab him.

"THORIN!"
The cart's rattling had been constant throughout most of the journey, but the last jolt in the road made the sleeping hobbit bounce in her seat and woke her completely from her nap. It was a sad thing when the highlight in her day was now having a decent nap rather than thinking of the next chapter to write. Marie righted herself and bit back any groan of protest her body gave to the jolt. She was sitting in the back of one of the small supply wagon's the dwarves had brought on the journey to Rivendell, having created something of a small nest for herself when it became too hard for her to walk.

Her bones shook and clattered like cookies in a glass jar, painfully at first but she had grown accustomed to the aches of her body. She was well passed her dues of age related ailments. In the months following her departure from Rivendell it was like time was racing to catch her before the caravan arrived at the mountain and Marie was becoming a shadow of her former self. She could hardly move about without aid or a watchful eye in case she crumbled, her hair turned as white as snow and her skin had dried and withered, resembling a well written page of her book. Hardly proud anymore but the hobbit still maintained her dignity, which in Gloin's opinion was stubbornness.

He was seated next to the driver of the cart behind her's and she had often glanced out the back to make sure they were still trailing along behind them. Sure enough Gloin was still there in deep conversation with a young dwarf whose beard looked to have only just grown in properly.

Gloin looked over at her and smile. "Ah, you're finally awake Lass. We're just out of the old Greenwood."

"Oh thank goodness." Marie sighed. Mirkwood still held its strange power even after all this time and Marie had no desire to feel that lost again. With a good grip on her cane Marie carefully lent out the back of the wagon and saw the silhouette of the Lonely Mountain.

A fresh pang of discomfort hit her in the chest. This would only grow more frequent the closer the caravan got, a fact Marie had accepted when they had passed over the Misty Mountains and the floodgate of memories opened. The path was starting to head upwards, the beginning of the ascent up the slopes of the Chard Hills, as they were called by the dwarves that had returned to Erebor. For all the green and wildlife that had returned to the land with Smaug death, the hills on the mountain's far west side remained barren and void of new growth save for the thorn bushes that bore dry and brittle branches. A reminder of the past to caution the future. The road was new and well worn in Marie's eye, no doubt from those who travel westward to the Blue Mountains to trade.

"We have to make a stop at Ravenhill. Hugen here needs …" But all Marie heard was 'Ravenhill' and the rest of what Gloin said was lost. Her hands began to shake and she tucked them into her shawl to hide them.

Ravenhill.

Not Ravenhill.

Marie wasn't ready for this.

Was she ready for any of this at all?

Now was not the time to second guess this decision, not when it was almost at the end and she had
waited sixty years to say it. The shaking subsided to just her left hand, a promising sign that she was not on the verge of hysteria. It was just mild shock.

Ravenhill came into sight. It was indeed very different from sixty years ago, with completed walls and new thick wooden structures, painted the colour sand with red tiled roofs. But regardless what was actually there, Marie couldn't help but see ashened ruins and falling snow.

No this place will never change for her. Here was one of her most precious and yet pained memories.

She could still taste the blood on her lips.

~*~

"THORIN!"

The frigid wind of the north went still in the following seconds of Thorin's reckless decision. Marie felt the air in her mouth, in her lungs and in her gut turn solid and foul as his name left her lips. He had let Azog stab him. He had let Azog stab him! Why!? Azog, not without his own slight surprise at his nemesis' sudden and apparent defeat, curled his lip with glee but with a sudden swift thrust, Thorin cut his victory short by driving Orcrist up into his chest. Azog gave a gasp akin to the sound of being choked.

Thorin had finally landed a fatal blow on the Pale Orc, at the cost of his own flesh.

Marie wanted to shriek, cry bloody murder, give any further verbal response to such an idiotic decision but the last of her voice was lost and all she could do was stare, mouth gaping like a hooked fish.

Thorin used Azog's momentary shock to flip their positions and Marie had to roll away or be crushed by them. Thorin kept a firm grip on his sword handle so that Orcrist remained lodged in Azog's chest. Azog's blade however slipped out of Thorin with a sickening plop as blood pooled from the wound and dripped down over his tunic. With the Orc's back to the ice Thorin pushed his sword further in until Marie felt the ice crack as the tip went through Azog completely and into the river's frozen surface. The Orc convulsed and twitch beneath Thorin and looked as though he was trying to say something, but choked on a mouthful of blood.

Thorin did not move, or broke his gaze. He watched Azog take his last few pained breaths.

Marie too watched with a sick satisfaction as the Pale Orc finally went slack, never again to draw a cursed breath.

Once sure of his enemy's definite demise, Thorin groaned in pain and staggered away from body, leaving his sword still protruding from the Orc. Marie wished to be faster in her attempt to get to him but her injured wrist made it difficult to get up.

"Thorin! Don't move." As soon as she made it to his side Marie reached for the wound. They had to close it and fast. "Oh my ... Stay still you've lost too much blood. Thorin, stop moving." But the dwarf did not listen to her pleas and staggered towards the waterfall's edge.

"I have to see ... have see. With my own eyes."

Marie didn't know just what he meant or if was the blood loss making him ramble, but all the same
she wrapped one of his arms over her shoulders and helped him walk. Her own injury was screaming at her to stop but like a fool she ignored it and focus on the laboured breaths Thorin took. Azog must have nicked his lung. Together they made it to the icy ledge and saw what remained of the battle below. The Eagles had broken up to bulk of the Orc armies that now scattered about without direction or purpose. The horrible malformed bats did not match the sheer size of the Eagles and the remaining allied forces pushed the Orcs out of Dale and into the east.

Thorin's chest shook and Marie struggled to stop his weight from tipping backwards. She frantically tried to keep him awake and steady but to no avail. The dwarf's knees gave way beneath him and Marie couldn't stop his fall.

Marie rolled him to his back and tried again stop the bleeding, her trembling fingers slick with blood. Thorin's voice hitched as he tried to speak. "Enough Marie. There is nothing to ..."

"No. Don't say that. You so much as think of finishing that sentence I will find a frying pan and beat you senseless."

It pained him to laugh but he did so, "Please Marie. It's useless."

"No Thorin. You're going to live."

"I wish to part in peace ...

Mare shook her head. "Stop that you stubborn clothead you're not .. no I refuse to ... no, no you are not ..." Her voice trembled like Thorin's as she stumbled over her words. It was only when Thorin gently pulled her hands away from his wound and she had stopped rambling did she realise that she had started crying, hot tears trailing down her face and neck.

He was right, there was nothing they could do.

Thorin was dying.

The snow around them turned from white to red as Marie tried to make it as peaceful as circumstances allowed. A hard task when one hand was injured and tucked into her middle and the rest of her wanted to shake with sobs. "Can you move at all?"

"My arm ... it's ..." Thorin drew a shuddery breath and strained to shift himself, "My left side feels ..."

"No don't move. If it hurts don't ..."

"I can't feel it."

Thorin's hand went to her chin, nudging it so that she was looking at him. "My words at the gate ... I would take them back a thousand times over." His knuckles brushed the length of her jaw and across her cheek. "Forgive me. I was so blind."

Marie locked her hand around his wrist to keep him there.

"I could have given you rarest of gems to adorn your hair, the purest of gold chains and rings or even moonlight robes that would shame the stars. But all would fail to compare to your smile."

Marie sucked in a breath and noiselessly laughed. "You're delusional."

"Perhaps I am. Perhaps I have been enchanted by you Mariellena Baggins since I stepped through
your door and now I see sunlight in your eyes when you look at me, so pure and beautiful."

What a sight must have been, all ruddy red from the cold and crying with dirt and dried blood dotting her skin like abnormal freckles, yet Thorin proclaimed her to be beautiful.

"I wish I could have made you happy."

"But you did Thorin."

"All I did was lead you into such peril."

"For that I am glad. I have seen many wonders both terrible and beautiful. I've touched the sky and explored the depths of the earth, which is far more than any hobbit deserves."

Thorin smiled yet his eyes were sad. He weakly tried to wipe away her tears and catch new fallen ones. "Go back to your books, your chair, your garden ..." His hand sagged in her grip as the rest of him grew heavy. Marie clutched him even tighter, like holding him would prevent the inevitable. "Plant your flowers. Watch them grow." He looked above them at the sky, peace settling over his eyes and Marie panicked. She wasn't ready.

"No no no no wait Thorin. Wait I ..." She release his limp hand and took hold of his face, injured hand and all. "Please don't leave me."

Her hair fell like a curtain between the world and them as she leant down and pressed a trembling kiss to his lips. The moment their lips touched Thorin gave a sharp intake of air before softening and returning her kiss. Marie wanted to hold on to the moment forever just so that she knew for certain that it was real, even if it was so terribly bittersweet. They parted slowly but stayed close, unable to completely break apart. Marie curled up into his side with her head tucked into his neck, her good hand clutching at his coat.

Being so tightly pressing into his neck, she felt his dimming pulse and the vibrations of his deep voice as he muttered three little words. They came as a sigh on the wind with all the force of a storm, rocking Marie to her very core.

"I love you."

~*~

By the time Dwalin had finally felt with last of the goblin mercenaries and re-enforcements had made it up the hill, it was too late. The dwarves both company and Iron Foot, found their King dead, the Pale Orc impaled on his Elven blade and the small burglar huddled over Thorin's body.

The setting sun turned the sky a mournful purple and shone gold light on his now forever peaceful face. The company came closer to be sure while the Iron Foot soldiers remained distant with their heads bowed in duty bound grief. Bifur sunk to his knees and began a long string of dwarven words and groans with Bofur and Bomber holding his shoulders. Oin and his brother knelt as well, but held themselves strong and bowed their heads and their axes at their feet. While Dori comforted a crying Ori, Nori helped Balin as he collapsed against a boulder with shuddering breaths. Only Dwalin dared to draw closer. Marie raised her head and looked to him. Her eyes were red and her tears had long dried up on her skin. She couldn't cry anymore. When asked what had happened, Marie simply responded with "He died for the ones he loved."
Far off to the shadows, Gandalf lingered back in deep remorse. He knew that there was always a price in war, but that never made paying it any easier.

By the barest margin, the battle had been won.

But not without great loss.
The Road Goes On

The level of calm with which Marie sat with came from years of social callings from relatives, wanted and unwanted, and it was thanks to that she hadn't already cracked under the gaze of the dwarf lord sitting across from her.

"Do we have an accord then my Lord?"

Dain thumbed the beads of his illustrious beard thoughtfully, giving Marie a hard look that might at once intimidated her. He was all fur and leathers and was a stubborn as a boar, right down to the tusks he had woven into his beard. But after everything she had been subjected to, this was nothing. She took his strange appearance with a grain of salt and gave him the respect now befitting him.

With the death of Thorin's and both his heirs, the secession of the throne naturally passed to the closest kin, to Dain. He took the title of 'King Under the Mountain' and made peace with the Lake men and the elves when the battle had ended with all sides agreeing that enough blood had been shed.

Marie was lucky with how the dwarf lord went about dealing with her and pardoned of her crime with the support of both a wizard and eleven of Thorin's most trusted warriors. This included reclaiming her promised payment which she already planned to give away. That was the reason for her meeting with Dain the fourth morning after the battle, to settle the terms of her contract. Dain was beyond difficult to easily reason with but Marie held her ground in the discussion.

It did help that Balin at her side, figuratively and physically, as she made her requests, interjecting when she needed advice.

"Tis a strange arrangement ya want." Dain all but slapped his meaty hand on the table where her original contract lay between the two parties. A miracle the document had survived the journey, but the same could be said for Marie. "I can not pretend to know the events that led to this, nor will I pretend that those airy sprites were innocent to a fault. "But," Dain shook his head. "You, little mouse, appear more ballsy than you let on, doing what you did. And if Thorin respected that ... then so will I."

They shook hands and Balin pulled out the necessary document, pre written by Balin of course. Marie watched the ink from the signatures dry as Balin thanked Dain in his usual calm and clever manner. The black lines settled into the parchment as Marie plucked at the loose end of her bandaged wrist. Oin had set it and bound it in a think ointment that smelt of rotten leaves.

"You will make a fine King, Lord Dain." Balin bowed his head.

"No need for your flattery you old goat." The large dwarf clapped Balin over the shoulder with a wide grin. "You were always too clever for your own good."

"Well someone must be?"

"Aye. Now I must excuse myself. There is a feast to be had and I for one will not miss a chance to properly send off my kin."

Neither one of the dwarves noticed Marie's sudden change in her demeanor. She had willed herself all morning not to think on it else she would have broken long ago. But she would not break now and took in a deep breath and stood up straight.
They had buried Thorin, Fili and Kili that morning.

Dain took his leave after bidding Marie a silent goodbye and Balin rolled his shoulders back to stretch his old muscles. "If I am honest my dear, I had no real idea just how that would have turned out. We are fortunate that luck was on our side."

"I know." Marie said and smoothed down her skirt. The last few days had seen her accept a second offer of clothes, this time a sensible plain woolen skirt and a thick shirt that hung to her knees, held up with black belt with an intricate pattern imprinted into the leather. Good sturdy threads to see her all the way home. As would the travel pack loaded with brown bread, cheese and a full skin of water sitting against the wall next to Sting, waiting for Marie.

Another thing Balin had taken care of.

While the dwarf collected up the documents and his writing equipment Marie picked up her sword, newly cleaned and weighing even more than usual, and slowly slipped the belt around her hips. Her movements slow as she thought back to the funeral. It had been truly somber event. The dwarven survivors of the Iron Foot army had gathered in the dim hall, holding candles of beeswax to give light over the ceremony. One King buried into the stone of the mountain and a new King rises in the wake of it all. The two wizards and Beorn watched on from afar as the company gave their last goodbyes to their fallen friends. Marie was thankful she had been given a private moment before the ceremony to say her's, where she kissed her fingertips and pressed them into Fili and Kili's cold cheeks. But with Thorin …

Marie's heart was still bleeding and seeing him lying on the pyre with the Arkenstone upon his breast only widened the wound.

Marie slipped the travel pack on and tied the cords of the straps firmly so that the weight settled evenly across her shoulders. She was ready. Balin walked all the way with her and kept asking small questions to fill the silence, most of them with an undertone of concern. He wanted her to stay just for a few more days, until she was sure enough to travel, but Marie insisted she would leave that day and that she would be well with Gandalf for company. "Provided he doesn't disappear on me in the middle of nowhere again." She joked. Balin seemed more at ease. When they reached the gate Marie was treated to the pleasant surprise of the whole company, come to send her off.

"You didn't have to." Marie told them, touched but still surprised.

"You really didn't think we'd let you off with saying goodbye, did you?" Balin grinned. The sly dog probably told them all.

Ori stepped forward. "What kind of friends would we be?" His older brothers nodded in agreement.

Marie's heart fluttered with so much joy she was sure she could cry. She went to each dwarf and kissed their red cheeks before being crushed in their arms. She even wiped away a few tears from Dori's cheeks.

"Here lass." Bofur handed her a pair of gloves that would swallow her hands, which Marie was sure was his own. "The trip will be long and cold. It will be hard to come by a new set of fingers."

"I'll be sure to keep an eye on them." She said.

"Oh. Before we forget. Should you find yourself near that Troll horde on your way home, there's a small deposit marked with an old boot on top of it." He winked at Nori, "A gift from myself and the
boys."

She thanked them all, biting her tongue on her protest for such an unnecessary thing for them to do,

This was much harder than Marie anticipated. She armed herself with a smile held the straps of her pack with both hands. "If any of you find yourself in the Shire again, for any reason, just remember teas at four and dinner around half seven." She said. "You are all welcome so don't bother knocking." All of them gave her a bow, their most humble gesture of respect to another. Gandalf was waiting across the narrow hastily built wooden bridge with a horse for himself and a pony just the right size for her. Balin walked with her all the way to the pony's side, even helping attach her pack to the saddle. "I mean it Balin." Marie placed her hand over his, "My home will always be open to you all."

"As will the mountain for you lass."

"But ... just one thing."

Balin cocked his head, "What? Name it lass."

"Try not to empty my pantry in one sitting."

~*~

The pace at which Dale now moved at could only be described as lethargic in comparison to the first time Marie had stepped foot in it. Quieter too. The lull of idle chatter and the tap and cluck of the city's clean up echoed the worn out folk from the battle. Their dead were burnt, their losses plenty, but they went on living. Marie walked slowly to watch the people. Walls were being built up again, roofs re thatched with whatever could be spared, even the young found the will to play amongst the construction. There were one or two elves helping tend the gravely wounded with the older women and archers watching from the walls from what Marie saw on her way in, indicating that their presence was still very much in the city. Their arrival did not go unnoticed and many stopped their work to stare at the wizard and the hobbit, both of whom played such surprising roles in the battle that had changed all their lives. The people kept their distance though and allowed Maire and Gandalf to tie off their mounts in peace. Marie walked around the pony to her pack. She wouldn't need the whole thing, only two important objects tucked safely in the side pockets.

"When you're ready Marie." Gandalf passed behind her, "We have yet another King to meet."

The hobbit nodded and held the small burgundy box and parchment close to her chest. This was also to cradle her injured wrist close to protect it from the cold. It was hard to find Bard since he was trying to be in several places at once, from helping hoist up planks for roof repair to inspecting food supplies to the wounded, yet Gandalf still managed to find him and settled him to sit. They chose the steps leading to the former great hall and Gandalf sat with him while Marie stayed standing. Bain brought him a bowel of broth and little Tilda sat in his lap to keep him there.

"I take it you've come to bid your goodbyes." He said after a few spoonfuls, "I'm sure as a wizard you have more place to meddle with"

Gandalf chuckled. "Oh my meddling is done for now. Now I must make sure Miss Marie is returned to the Shire in one piece"
Bard nodded and passed his bow to Tilda. "Going home Marie?"

"Yes. I've had my adventure." She said softly.

"Indeed, but we also come barring some rather welcoming news for you and your people." Gandalf pulled out his pipe and began to pick out the ash. "Marie dear, you may do the honors." Bard gave her all his attention with a weary but still curious look. Marie handed him the folded parchment and quickly explained.

"To repay the help given to the company of Thorin Oakenshield and the kindness you have shown me." Bard unfurled the parchment and read each line slowly, his expression growing more intense.

"What is it Da?" Tilda craned her neck to see what it said but Bard quietly read aloud it's contents. "In accordance with the wishes of Mistress Mariellena Baggins of Bag End, the fourteenth share of the treasure of Erebor promised to her by Thorin, son of Thrain, shall be bequeathed to the people of Esgaroth. By order of Dain, Lord of the Iron Hills and King Under the Mountain, a quarter of said share shall be delivered within the next full moon of his graces' coronation to the city of Dale ..." Bard's voice trailed off as he read on.

"The share will come in installments hopefully on a monthly base. Balin will be the chief liaison." Marie explain. "I hoped to have it begin sooner but Dain requested time for the dwarves to reestablish a strong foothold in the mountain."

"Marie." Bard lowered the parchment and looked at her with such happiness. He wrapped his arm around Tilda "The fact that you have done this for my people is more than enough on your part."

Tilda looked up at her father, "Does this mean we can get our home back Da?"

"It means sweetheart," He gave her a tight hug, "We can make our home here."

The sight alone of the father and daughter so happy together made it all the more worth it in Marie's mind. She and Gandalf shared a smile. "I take it Master Bowman you have accepted the role as Lord of Dale?" The wizard asked, still picking at his pipe. Bard let out a huff, "Seems I have. The people have given me little choice in the matter."

"They believe in you Bard. The fact that you didn't seize power when it was first offered is a testament to your character." Marie smiled. "I personally believe you would make a just and fair ruler." "Thank you Marie." She shifted her stance and felt the weight of the box in her hand, remembering what else she wanted to accomplish. "Is King Thranduil still here?"

"He is, hold up in his war tent." Bard jutted his chin in the necessary direction. "I know he plans to leave soon. Why do you ask?"

"I have business to do with him as well." Marie excused herself but Gandalf stopped her, "You are certain you want to do this alone my dear?"

"Positive Gandalf." She shot him a broad smile before heading off. There were fewer Elven guards patrolling the area surrounding the war tent and none of them took much if not any notice of Marie. When she arrived at the tent's entrance she glanced up at the guards posted there and when they gave no response to her presence she made her way in.

Thranduil was sitting upon his throne, or more accurately slumped into the thing. He was without his cloak and crown and had a hand to his face, a finger absently brushing across his lip. He whole frame appeared heavy in the throne, losing all the grace and power he usually commanded and Marie thought she could see his true age pressing down on him. She even dared to think it made
him look human. This may have been a poor time to speak to him, but Marie squared her shoulders and gently cleared her throat. Thranduil moved ever so slightly to the noise and lifted his head. There was so much sadness in his eyes that Marie felt a pang in her chest.

"Hail Thranduil son of Oropher. Elen síla lumenn omentilmo." She was sure she may have butchered one or two elvish words but Thranduil still raised an eyebrow in surprise.

"Impressive attempt." He said and straightened himself up. "Did the wizard teach you that?"

When she nodded Thranduil shook his head slowly with what may have been a smirk peeking through. "His pronunciation always left something to be desired."

"I may have to work on my own." Marie made a sheepish face. "If you are able I would like to speak with you. Or have I come at an inappropriate time?"

Thranduil dropped his hand away so that it hung limp of the armrest. "The time is not inconvenient. Forgive my melancholy demeanor. It has been some many hundreds of years since I have lead my people into a war, so the feeling of loss is quite ... profound one might say." He tilted his head as he went on. "I should offer you my own condolences. Seeing as you have also suffered a loss."

There was no point in Marie trying to deny or play the fool to Thranduil's words. He spoke the truth after all. "Thank you ... My lord, I have come to say goodbye, and to bring you this." She brought attention to the box in her hand. Thranduil pushed up out of his throne, again showing signs of fatigue as he did.

"A gift? For what reason have I to be so esteemed in the mind of a burglar that I deserve a gift?" Though he may have been taunting her there was nothing malicious in his voice.

"Again, this is done not for your sake." Marie set the box on the table, the same one she had presented the Arkenstone, and stepped back. "I believe these are precious to you."

Marie held her wrist tenderly and waited. The Elven King appeared baffled but Marie could see something in his crystal blue eyes, a flicker almost imperceptible to the untrained eye but Marie was quite good now at seeing it in others. Hope. With three long strides he stood before the gift, hand outstretched like a child. He hesitated and Marie could see him glance down towards her before flipping the latches and lifting the lid. The sound of his quick intake of air was the only sound in the tent and Marie watched as the elf's long white fingers hovered over the shining gems of the necklace carefully laid out within the box, the light bounced of Thranduil's skin like starlight reflecting of water.

"Just as my share allowed me to claim the King's Jewel, I was able to lay claim to these with the right to return them to you." Marie said and broke the silence.

Thranduil closed his eyes. "You think that returning the heirlooms of my kin would wash clean the past?"

"No."

"Then may I ask ...?"

"I do not know your cause of animosity towards dwarves, or in fact all elves and dwarves to hate. But I hope that this will bring some form of peace. Between you and them or for your own mind? Well ... that is for you to decide."

Thranduil closed the lid carefully and lightly brushed the wood, then turned to Marie sharply. He
closed to gap between them and Marie craned her head up to look at him. The elf's expression softened as he sunk to his knee to eye level with Marie, though he still had a good foot on her. His hand closed around both hers and he brought them up between them. "You need not have done this, yet you did, freely and without the expectation of reward. An act of selflessness where none deserved it." His thumbs swept over hands, leaving streaks of cool patches on her skin that did not chill her, but soothed. "You have my unwavering gratitude and I offer my deepest thanks."

Thranduil bowed his head and placed a kiss along her wrist. Marie was overwhelmed with a feeling of pride as the Elven King raised his head and gave an honest and gentle smile. He stood fluidly and escorted her like she herself was royalty to the open flap and stopped her just short of the snow covered edge. "The Valar guide your every step westward and protect you Mariellena Baggins, Elf Friend." He placed a hand over his heart, inclined his head then swept his hand towards her. Marie was compelled to mimic the gesture and did so with smaller, less sure movements before finally leaving.

When she returned to the horses a small crowd had gathered, some face Marie recognised while other she did not but she sure she spotted the small faces of the children she had regaled with stories, peeking out from behind their parent's skirts. Bard and children were of course present with Bain clutching a ceremonial shield and Sigrid holding out a small cloak. Gandalf was already mounting his large chestnut.

"We must make our way, before the winter has a hold over us completely." He announced loudly so that Marie heard it loud and clear.

"Right so Gandalf." She picked up her skirt and hurried along. Bain and Sigrid stepped forward, "We wanted to say thank you for helping us." Sigrid said. They must have heard about the agreement. "Bain thought that you may need some protection on your journey." Sigrid indicated to the shield in her brother's hands, "I think you need a little more coverage."

Marie smiled. "Thank you both. They're both equally wonderful gifts."

"I helped to pick them." Tilda added with enthusiasm. Marie had to laugh for the little girl's unwavering smile. Bain attached the shield to the pony's already full saddle while the girls helped to pin the thick cloak around Marie's shoulders. "Alright girls. The lady needs to be off." Bard stepped around the pony and shooed the girls back. He picked Marie up and set her down on the beast, "Safe travels, keep on the path. And Marie?"

"Yes?" She adjusted herself in the saddle and hooked her feet into the stirrups.

"Don't go drowning yourself again. I won't be there to rescue you." Bard gave her that lopsided grin once last time and Marie threw her arms around him, being the perfect height on pony back. He hummed into her hair and rubbed her back slowly.

"Take care of yourself Bard."

"And you lass."

He pulled back and kissed her forehead. The crowd pulled away to allow Gandalf and Marie to move their steeds onward, a handful of the onlookers calling out their own words of luck and safety. Marie cast one last look around at Bard and his family. Gandalf noticed her sad expression and once they were out of the city and on the road southwest he began what was a string of odd conversation that would fill the time.

"How did Thranduil take to your gift?"
"Well I guess. There was a sense of relief on his face and yet ... regret."

"I am sure there was."

Marie glanced at the wizard. "If there is a story with those gems, do I want to here it?"

Gandalf sighed, "Perhaps. I may share it someday."

"I'll hold you to that Gandalf. But Thranduil did thank me and called me Elf Friend." The wizard's head turned to her sharply. "Elf Friend?" He made a strange noise under his breath and returned his gaze to the road ahead.

"Is that a good thing?"

"My dear Marie, it is the highest honor for an elf to bestow."

Yet another name to add to her list. Barrel Rider, Riddle Maker, Burglar and now Elf Friend. Marie flushed pink and not from the winter air. It was also then she noticed how little her injured wrist had been bothering her, and was an experimental flick she came to realise that it did not hurt at all.

Not long into their journey they were joined by Radagast and his rabbit drawn sled. Gandalf quickly explained that they would travel through the south half of Mirkwood where the dangers were minimal. Marie agreed heartily and welcomed Radagast. They two wizards took the lead while Marie's pony lagged behind without Marie giving her the right encouragement to speed up. The pony eventually stopped all together and Marie twisted in the saddle to look back, the Lonely Mountain dominating the landscape. Gandalf and Radagast noticed this and stopped themselves, watching the hobbit.

"Marie?" The Grey wizard called softly, "Is everything alright?"

"I will come back here." She said. "One day. I will come back, but not yet."

'Not when it still hurts.'

She twisted back and spurned the pony to move on. If Radagast or Gandalf had more questions they kept their blissedly to themselves and carried on. Marie straightened her back and looked forward towards home. It would be long, maybe treacherous but she would face it with an ounce of caution, a barrel full of courage and a small magic ring just in case. After all, what was a mountain troll to a dragon.
Home Sweet Home

To say that things were never completely the same when Marie Baggins returned home was a gross understatement. Her return was met with a great hullabaloo in Hobbiton, mainly on the account she had been proclaimed dead by most folks including many of her relatives. In fact the day she stepped foot on the path up the hill to Bag End was the same day the townsfolk were auctioning off most of her possessions and all looked quite startled when a stranger clad in thick winter wool, a sword at her hip, a shield on her back and armload of treasure appeared and claimed to be Mariellena Baggins. If took no short amount of angry explanations, even a minor threat with Sting when Lobelia Sackville-Baggins refused to relinquish her spoons, but within the week Marie had set her home to rights again, with the old study gaining a few exotic additions. But even with her home back to the way it was, Marie felt misplaced. On the third half day after her return she found herself dusting away at the mantle over the main room's fireplace, where her picture frames sat neatly. Alistair's small frame sat below her mother's, facing towards the wall where their great great uncle Took hung in his ancient frame. Appropriate when Marie thought about about. She talked to them everyday, telling them about her great big adventure. It filled the now apparent silence that followed her through the rooms like shadow. In time the solution came to her with a visit to town and sit in the Green Dragon, if only to surround herself with familiar sounds and stave off the silence of Bag End as she nursed a mug of ale.

Soon her presence no longer puzzled the regular dwellers of the tavern and some more curious or nosy farmers started asking her about her strange disappearance. Marie told her tale in tidbits, finding the hobbits a far more invested audience than portraits. The older farmers and shop keepers shook their heads at her absurd story and some openly had doubts if there was any was true, and yet the still listened in closely.

All of Hobbiton didn't know what to make of this new Marie, one moment so vibrant and wily and the next withdrawn but observant, and treated the change as a sign that there were great magic forces beyond the borders that had changed her completely. They were half right. She was not the same hobbit who ran blindly out of the Shire her father's old clothes.

"Your beginning to sound like you've gone round the bend there Miss Baggins." Hamfast her neighbor tapped the rim of his tankard as she spoke one night, "Dragons can't talk."

"Have you ever met a dragon?"

"... Well no but ... how do I know you're not just pulling me leg?"

Marie laughed loud and boldly. "Maybe I have gone well round the bend and I'm determined to have you all accompany me along the way." There was a merry cheer around the table while Hamfast just shook his curly head more.

"You're cracked there Marie Baggins."

Cracked, fool hearty, peculiar, bent but all around mad. These were but a handful of the word used to describe Marie now and part of her was quite proud of that fact and often flaunted it to the amusement of her listeners and the horror of of the Sackville-Baggins. At times when a hobbit passed by Bag End they heard the strange lyrics of 'Blunt the knives, bend the forks,' coming from the evergreen bush near the gate.

One morning on her way back from shopping, Marie came up the path and found her gate was blocked by two shaggy ponies with two sacks balanced out on the saddle. If the make of the
saddles and tacks didn't give them away, the two dwarves bickering at the door did.

Balin and Bofur had come for a visit.

"The door is opened you know!" Marie called up to them, hoisting her heavy basket off her hip and laying it on the path.

Bofur's hat flapped as he twisted around and Marie almost shed tears of joy at the sight of his large happy grin. "See I told you she wouldn't mind." He said Balin as they hobbled back down the garden steps.

"It's still not a gentleman like thing to barge into a lady's house when she is not in." Balin countered but Bofur didn't listen as he was too busy pulling Marie into the biggest hug she had received in a long time, so big she was lifted off her feet.

"It's so good to see you, after so long." Marie wheezed out once Bofur finally released her.

"Aye lass. You have not changed one bit since you left." Bofur patted down her shoulders as if to dust off a layer of dirt she had accumulated.

"Well, she's a little less gaunt and little more pink." Balin held open the gate for Marie as Bofur picked up her basket for her. "But all the same, I am glad to see you Marie."

Maire pulled the old dwarf in and buried her head into the crook of his neck, the long white hairs of his beard brushing her cheek.

The arrival of the two dwarves did not go unnoticed throughout Hobbiton and Marie could spot from the window the sticky beaks lingering up and down Bag Shot Row to see for themselves who had come to town. Marie ignored them and continued to put together Luncheon for the three of them, but not before asking if she should expect any more visitors.

"No Marie dear. The rest of our caravan is setting up for the night near Bywater."

"So … you don't need a room?" Marie handed Balin a hefty helping of smoked ham. He nodded politely and tucked into the meal. The two had just finished explaining that they were one their way to Erud Luin with Iron Foot merchants.

Bofur wiped his mouth quickly and said with a mouthful of mash, "We're already behind as it is and need to be up by sunrise tomorrow to make good time."

Disappointment sat in Marie's stomach like a pit. Perhaps next time.

They spoke of many things. How the company fared, the reconstruction of Dale, old trade routes reopening for the first time in centuries. Balin also talked of the possible recolonization of the ancient city of Moria now that the Orc hold had weakened over the East. Not once was Thorin mentioned, or what had happened in the battle.

"So tell us," Bofur took the conversation and turned its focus to her, "How did you find coming back to the realm of domesticity?"

"Oddly enough, strange." Marie absently pushed her food around with her fork, "I drink more, half of Hobbiton still think I'm an imposter and I've only just stopped myself from putting on Sting every morning."

The two dwarves gave a hearty laugh. "We have made a warrior of you Marie." Bofur clapped her
over the shoulder.

"Hardly. I keep expecting a goblin to burst out of my rose bush." Marie shrugged.

"Well it's only been nine months since you left. You'll settle yourself into your old life in the good grace of time."

Marie stopped her poking and looked at Balin, a deep line setting between her brows. "Is that how long it's been?" She asked softly.

"Aye."

Marie dropped her gaze. A whole nine months since …

Immediately Balin noted the sudden change in the air and realized that his words had unsettled her. He shot Bofur a prompting look which sent him into the front living room. Balin gently covered her stilled hand with his, "Has it been hard lass?" He prodded. Marie didn't say anything but gave a tiny nod to him, her hand clenching into a fist under his fingers. Baling understood. "I'm sorry we didn't come sooner. But there was much to do to rebuild we simply …"

"Lost track of time?"

They shared a smile as Bofur returned with a large black ornate chest. "Almost forgot. The lads finally got around to figuring out what gifts to send." The toy maker changed the mood so easily with his charm, cleverly distracting Marie from her unease.

"I wasn't expecting gifts from any of you." Mare said as Bofur set the chest down at her end of the table.

"But they're here. So not much you can do but enjoy them. Go on, take a look."

Balin and Bofur took it in turns pointing out the contents of chest. There was a smaller wooden box with small medicinal jars from Oin, a hefty bag of gold from Gloin, books on the dwarven history and cliffnotes on understanding Khuzdul tucked in their pages, a red leather bound journal from Ori with Marie's initials pressed into the cover and the most interesting piece in the collection a twisted horn with a crack from base to tip.

"Where did this come from?" Marie balanced the horn on her fingertips, twisting it in the light.

"It came from the Greatest of Calamities himself. Dragon claws and scales are rare items to find without the whole dragon."

Now Hamfast couldn't refute her claims on dragons.

Bofur went on pointing out the other various trinkets also sent but Marie found herself slipping from her kitchen and floating to the east, in the darkness of a treasure hoard with her only source of warmth was a dragon's breath across her neck, but she pulled herself back and played the dutiful host as best she could. Bofur and Balin stayed right as the sun touched the hilltops, until their second tankard had been drained. The parting at Bag End's gate was filled with promises of more visits from themselves and even more gifts to fill her study.

She stayed rooted to the ground until they were well passed the vegetable gardens and plum orchards at the end of Bagshot Row and out of sight. A cool northern breeze was on its way and the sun was all but gone leaving just the inky blue sky behind. There was no brightness to it, no pinks or burnt gold rays that usually filled Hobbiton at this sleepy hour and Marie wondered if it
was a reflection of her present melancholy mood. When the wind picked up she headed back indoors with slow steps.

"Nine months." Marie mused. She knew some time had passed but never gave much thought in counting to days, but sure enough when she returned to the kitchen and checked the calendar it was already the end of August. Her birthday was next month. Her fifty first. For the life of her she couldn't remember where she had spent her fiftieth. In a cave? Laketown. In the depths of Mirkwood? It didn't matter. Marie ambled about placing cups and pots back in their place, hanging the black kettle back over the stove, rekindling the fireplace in the living room and finally lighting the lamps in the winding hallways before retiring to her armchair, a cup of tea in hand and the chest at her feet. Echoes of an old routine that was easy to slip into without a second thought. She would not go to the Green Dragon that night, no new stories for the jovial punters to enjoy. Marie needed ...

'Let me sit quietly for a moment.'

'You've been sitting quietly for far too long.'

Marie shook the memory out of her head. All the memories and emotions she had been keeping at bay were resurfacing against her will, pulling and pushing like the currant until Marie had little choice than to be sent downriver with it. She dug into the chest and pulled out a small wooden box. Pipe weed from Erud Luin. It didn't take long for her to find a long pipe and fill it. If it wasn't to satisfy a growing habit it was for the smell of it.

It was the same blend the dwarves smoked.

A smoky haze settled over Marie as she sat back in her chair, the fireplace popping calmly by her feet.

Balin and Bofur's presence had reminded her what she missed most, the sense of wondering what just might happen next, limitless conversations of the daftest things, the rumble of laughter. She missed all of it.

She missed all of them.

She missed him.

'I love you.'

Marie propped an arm up on the arm rest and pressed her hand to her temple, her curled fingers tugging on wisps of her hair. He told her that he loved her. And she loved him … only she never got to tell him that.

As the night went on and the dwarven leaf in her pipe had burnt out, Marie curled deeper into her chair as she watched they dying fire, and wondered. If things had gone differently just what would have followed? Would she still return home? Would she had stayed? The more she thought the more she dreamed, picturing a future that would never be. A calm, simple life surrounded by absurd comings and goings of rowdy dwarves. A further extension of relatives to her tree. Days filled with miner's songs whispering the halls replaced in the night with cheeky and bombastic ballads fit for a feast. She would have both hated and loved it in equal measure, so long as she could have seen Thorin smile over and over again.

Marie didn't care that her cheeks were wet from the endless tears she shed.

No one was around to see them fall.
She was all alone.

Again.
"Miss Baggins. Miss Baggins!"

The sound of her name tugged Marie out of her reverence. At her shoulder was Pri gently shaking her shoulder with a concerned look that made her young face pinch.
"Oh dear. I did it again?"

"You did." Pri nodded and hooked her hands under Marie's elbow and around her shoulders to help her stand. "I sometimes fear that one day that you'll be so far from us that your mind will wonder off to the stars themselves."

She was such a sweet thing. One of Bombur's many children and possibly one of the eldest. On her arrival Marie's health declined further and Bomber's wife insist at that Pri be around to keep her company, and to be the quick feet Marie once had should an emergency rose. Marie enjoyed her company very much, a gentle respite from the loud and rambunctious nature of the rest of her family who had welcomed Marie with open arms along with what remained of the Company of Oakenshield. Bombur, Bofur and Bifur were much the same except the silver that filled their beards and the spots on their noses while Dori's beard had doubled in size with more braids twisted around one another. Nori had grown as gruff as Dwalin on the outside but there was still a glint of mischief in his eye from time to time. Oin had long since passed and young Ori had gone with Balin to Moria as a scribe for the colony.

The hobbit used both the young dwarf and her cane as she pushed up from stone bench she had claimed as her own during her time in Erebor. She liked it for the view it offered from above the massive gates, the vast open horizon with the great Woodland Realm across the glistening lake and the tall sandy toned towers of Dale with their red rooftops. But best of all was the sky, stretching over head and beyond. Marie could find herself comfortably sitting for hours until she was deep in her own thoughts. But lately Pri was quite vigilant on not letting her stay out for too long, under instruction no doubt.

"Ma has supper ready if you're interested Miss Baggins." Pri said.

"Oh I'm not terribly hungry my dear. I would like to return to my room if that's …"

Pri understood and raised a hand. "Say no more. I'll let Ma know and have her save some for when you're ready." She went on to gossip about how a lad she was keen on gave her the most beautiful cloak pin he had made, but Marie was no fool. She knew that her new friend was trying to distract her.

Marie's arrival was a happy rush of air in what Marie perceived as an anxious held breath in the midst of a storm. War was brewing in the lands on the South, if rumors from Rohan and Gondor were to be believed, and in the far East the Men of Rhun had been spotted slowly edging in on the territories of both Dale and the Iron Hills. The whole of the mountain was on edge, waiting for the horns of battle to blow, but until then no one openly spoke of it and did their best to carry on. Should war summon, Dwalin, Nori and Bombur would most likely answer it's call. Marie could see the strain in her dwarves' eyes but said nothing.

After all, what could an old withering hobbit do now?

The guest apartment Marie had been gifted with was far too large for her. It was modest enough, spanning to the size of her front living room, kitchen and dining room at Bag End and what little
she had brought with her fit into a single drawer of the largely empty wardrobe. The hearth alone took up most of the far wall. Had Marie still the same vigor she possessed the previous year she would have utilized the space well and would have given the black oak desk a decent go.

Pri held open the thick door for Marie and was very patient with the hobbit's plodding steps into the apartment. Someone must have rekindled the hearth while she was out for the room was deliciously warm when they arrived and Marie felt the urge to set herself up in front of the blazing fire and never leave.

She did feel terribly cold.

"Would you like a new scroll tomorrow Miss Baggins?" Pri was moving the pile of papers and tomes on the dining table. Every three days one of her brothers Bilr who working in the Archives would bring new materiel for Maire. She had barely read through half of the last batch.

"No. I'm perfectly happy with my current one Pri. To think, fifty odd years and I still struggle with your language. Still easier to learn that dwarven cooking."

Pri gave a tiny snort. "Well then. Is there anything you need?"

"I should be alright Pri. You go on and get some dinner before your father claims it all." Marie shucked off her shawl and folded it neatly.

"Are you sure?"

"Most certainly. Don't make me chase you out." Marie winked and the young dwarf giggled all the way out the door.

"I will see you in the morning then Miss Baggins." Pri gave her a bright smile as she closed the door behind her. All Marie could do was smile back sadly.

She would not see her in the morning.

The room's temperature went up with the heavy door closed once more and the walls reflected the fire light like one of Gandalf's fireworks that danced in the sky. They were shaped little butterflies and were so much fun to chase.

Marie had to laugh. Of course she would remember such childhood memories now.

She placed her shawl on the table next to her books and scrolls and made her way to the bed, unbuttoning her clothes along the way. That was the handy thing about Hobbit clothes, simply made, practical and uncumbersome. Much like everything they were as a race.

Once her clothes were folded and tucked away Marie re-dressed in a thick nightgown. The white cloth hung off her frail shoulders causing the sleeves to droop passed her fingertips. Marie just shook her head at such a thing and sat gingerly at the head of her bed which faced the hearth. On the bedside table Marie kept a bouquet of flowers next to her, an odd custom to dwarves but Marie had always set them by her bed back home and wouldn't break habit now. Besides, this bouquet was special. It had started to wither weeks ago and the green and yellow had turned to bronze and yet Marie could not bring herself to part with it.

It was **Urzudul Abanul**. Sun Pebble.

Marie made bouquets for Thorin, Kili and Fili's tombs and laid them before the tombs in silence once a week.
The flowers that were left over Marie kept for herself.

She smiled and dance her fingers over the sharp edges that would crumble with her touch.

"I come from under the hill. And under the hill and over the hill my path has taken me." Her voice was a soft sigh in the silence. "Through the air I am she who walks unseen and is the guest of eagles. I am the Luck Wearer."

Marie set the flowers back on the side table and brought her hands together "Riddle Maker and Web Cutter." Thorin's ring was around heavy around her feeble finger, something solid and reliable while the rest of her withered. She twisted it round and round and brought it to her lips to kissed the rune on its surface.

"I am the Barrel Rider. Elf Friend. The one 'round the bend and cracked. Weaver of stories and mother to a parent less child."

Her hands dropped.

"I am ... So very, very tired."

~*~

In the morning when Pri came for her, Marie was gone.

She was tucked into the soft quilts of her bed, the image of peace dressed in white with her hands folded across her still breast and a lifetimes worth of worry lifted from her serene face.

They buried her in a tomb of grey marble, next to Thorin's deep in the cavern of the Fallen. An action that had raised more than a few bushy eyebrows but the Company would not have it any other way and went ahead with the unorthodox decision. Dwalin said that if any one deserved the spend their eternal rest in the resting place of Kings it should be the King's Burglar. There were only a few who were present to farewell the hobbit, Gloin openly wept for her and Nori had to hold him up by the shoulders. Bofur and Dwalin were silent and still while Dori and Nori spoke softly about their fondest memories of Marie. Bifur could only sniff loudly and wipe his nose. Bombur and his family were present, with Bombur's wife holding one hand and his youngest son holding the other. Pri scattered Sun Pebbles around the stone slab that covered the tomb. It was not adorned with a great long epitaph or carvings dedicated to past deeds and honours like Kili and Fili's, for the Company knew Marie would have rolled her eyes and told them how silly that seemed to her. Her tomb was marked with simply 'Mariellena Baggins. Friend to All. Beloved.'

There was one adornment, sent from Mirkwood when word had spread. A beautiful pale emerald no bigger than an acorn wrapped in fine twists of silver at resembled antlers that was placed at the top of her epitaph.

Three cloaked figures from Dale also came to pay their respects. The old man, once a boy who hid a Black Arrow, wore no crown or title before Marie's tomb and simply comforted his sisters as any other man.

One by one the remnants of the Company of Thorin Oakenshield filed past the tomb, each leaving a candle and quiet goodbyes to their strange little friend.
Pri was the last to leave the cavern of the Fallen, holding the last few bloom of Sun Pebble tightly to her heart. She promised she would make sure that there would always be flowers by Marie's tomb as she walked away slowly.

Pri couldn't help it and gave one last look back at the tomb before she reached the doorway. The candle light ebbed into the darkness and cast strange images that gave Pri cause to look again. She was sure it was a trick of the light but there looked to be someone still standing by Marie's tomb. That was impossible, Pri was sure she was the last one and looked closer. It was a woman in a summer dress of red with dark curls that twisted into a thick braid to reveal large point hobbit ears, but Pri could not see her face. She was about to speak, to call out and see if this was just a spectre but there was another person stepped out from the shadows and Pri silenced herself. This one was a dwarf no doubt, his coat that of Ered Luin make with a thick fur trim and boots capped with metal.

There was something familiar about him.

He took the strange woman's hand in his and pulled her close to his side, his head tilted as though to kiss her chestnut curls.

"Pri!"

The young dwarf gasped and spun around.

It was just Bofur. He took one look at her startled expression and immediately went to her side. "What is it lass? You look as though you've seen a ghost." He said, rubbing a hand up and down her arm.

Pri blinked and looked back at the tomb.

There was no one there.

"I ... I'm fine uncle." Pri took a deep breath. "Just a trick of the light."

Bofur wrapped his arm around her and together they left the cavern, and its inhabitants to their eternal peace.
To my dear Frodo,

I know this seems an impractical way to do it, but there is a reason for the nature of this letter. Should you find yourself reading this letter then that must mean two things. Firstly, you have succeeded in your quest and have come home safely.

Secondly, I have passed on from this life.

You may be wondering why I did not remain in Rivendell and where I have decided to spend my remaining days.

I have at last returned to the Lonely Mountain.

The reason being that I wanted to see my old friends from my adventures one last time and to be close to the man I loved when I finally go. You did ask me many times as to why I never married. The answer Frodo is that I loved and lost, and I knew I would never have that with another.

I wished I had spoken more with you beforehand but I could not find the right words at the time. Know this my boy, that I am so very proud of the man you have become and I am so very sorry for what may or may not have befallen you on your quest. I know more than anyone that you’re never the same once you’ve roamed the wilds. It is a strange world out there.

Always know this Frodo.

I love you as if you were my own and I always will, even if I am no longer around for you. Remember our lessons, tell your story and look forward in life. But don't forget to look back as well.

Farewell my beloved son

Mariellena Baggins of Bag End

Chapter End Notes

The End

End Notes

So yes, Bilbo's name in this is Marie.
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!