

(Every character depicted in the story below is a consenting legal adult over the age of 18)

A/N: Eloise stands up to our mysterious Dark Elf!

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“N-No... I r-refuse.”

Even Eloise can hardly believe the words that have just come out of her mouth. As such, it's not too surprising when Shadow goes still, staring at her intensely with those glowing red eyes through the slit in her face mask. The stare causes a rather undignified squeak to leave Eloise's lips... and yet, she doesn't take it back.

“Want to try that again?”

“... No. I won't betray him to you. I r-refuse.”

Tilting her head to the side as if Eloise has become a particularly interesting bug, the Dark Elf makes a considering sort of noise in the back of her throat.

“You won't, will you? That seems rather... presumptuous of you. What about your town, hm? Are you trying to end our arrangement, darling?”

Swallowing hard, Eloise straightens up in her father's chair. Funny, she'd gotten used to sitting here over the past seven months... but in this moment, she once again feels like a girl in over her head, just like she did back at the very beginning. And yet... she doesn't let any of that show on her face.

“Maybe... maybe I am. I don't think Last Hope needs your services anymore.”

Shadow lets out a half-scoff, half-laugh at that.

“You don’t, do you? You think this little shit heap would survive even a week without my benevolence? You think the Darkwoods wouldn’t swallow you all whole without me and my girls watching over you?”

A shiver runs down Eloise’s spine... but she stands her ground. Metaphorically speaking, anyways. She stays right where she is with her head held high.

“Yes. I do.”

And the funny thing is... she really does. Between Lord Thomas and Dame Camilla, Last Hope is more protected than it’s ever been. She hadn’t gotten to see Camilla deal with that goblin raid with her own eyes, admittedly...

However, based on the reports of those who were actually present and what Thomas had said about their incursion into the Darkwoods, Eloise had to believe that the Dame could deal with anything that came their way. And with Camilla training Thomas day in and day out, their protection would only grow stronger. She’d already seen how dedicated Thomas was, how fast he was growing... it was only a matter of time before he was just as strong as Camilla. She was certain of that.

Shadow continues to stare at her in silence for a long moment... before shaking her head slowly.

“Tsk, ts, ts. How... confident of you. And so very self-sacrificing as well. To give up your father so easily... I wonder, should I call you heartless, or selfless?”

What? Eloise furrows her brow in confusion, even as her lips twist into a grimace.

“I don’t know what you’re even saying. My father... my father is not long for this world. If you’re trying to threaten him in some way... it won’t work. Nor will threatening me.”

Letting out a titter of laughter, Shadow raised gloved hands in faux surrender.

“Threaten? Me? Darling, I’m not threatening anyone... I already said it, didn’t I? We’re a team, you and I. If you want to end our partnership, you certainly can... I’m just surprised you would give up on curing your father that easily.”

Eloise’s back goes ramrod straight at those words. Curing her father? What is the Dark Elf even talking about?! There is no cure for Rot Lung, not as advanced of a case as her father has. She’s just... she’s talking nonsense, obviously.

Certainly, Shadow had never once mentioned this was a possibility before... she’d made insinuations and threats that had scared Eloise into maintaining the arrangement between the Dark Elf and her father, but she hadn’t ever suggested that she had access to a cure...

“You’re lying. There’s no such thing as a cure to Rot Lung...”

Shadow just scoffs though, before sauntering back around to Eloise’s side of the desk.

“Correction, my dear... there’s no such thing as a cure to Rot Lung in human lands. You lot are so short-lived that you’re forever failing to progress forward.”

The Dark Elf moves until she’s behind Eloise’s chair again, sliding her hands up along the sides and then back of it as she continues to speak.

“Especially when you sometimes destroy your own sources of knowledge just because they came from someone your ancestors didn’t like or something. So... wasteful. But you know full well that I’m not a human, sweetheart. I’m not limited to human knowledge.”

That was... she was... it had to be a lie. There was no way this was real.

“Of course, I’m not expecting you to take my word for it or anything like that. Let’s pay your father a visit, shall we?”

And just like that... the presence behind her is gone. Eloise's eyes widen as she whips around, but Shadow has already vanished. The Dark Elf is no longer standing behind her chair... or anywhere else in the room.

Jerking to her feet, the brunette rushes out of the office and down the hall to her father's bedroom. Fortunately, neither Lord Thomas nor Dame Camilla see her in her frenzied, hurried state, or they would have had questions she couldn't even begin to answer.

Reaching the bedroom door, Eloise throws it open and rushes in, running to her father's side. What she sees takes her breath away and causes her eyes to widen in one fell swoop. Her father remains unharmed, still tucked into bed as he was when she left him last. However... his face has less wrinkles than it did an hour ago. His hands are less spotted.

He's not... cured by any stretch of the imagination, nor is he all that much younger in appearance, but he still looks like he's lost at least ten or fifteen years of age. Or perhaps regained it would be a better way of saying it.

Eloise is so shocked by the sight that she barely registers the door to the room being closed shut behind her. Shadow pads over from it to stand at her side, the Dark Elf's voice unbelievably smug as she hums.

"A taste of what could be if you... play along, darling."

Reaching out, Shadow runs a hand through Eloise's hair, carding gloved fingers through brown locks.

"Do as you're told, tell me what I want to know, and follow my instructions... and I'll cure your father for you. I'll bring him back from the brink of death and restore him to perfect health. And all you have to do in return... is inform upon one pesky little noble for me. That doesn't sound so bad, does it? I bet you anything he's a rotten monster under that kindhearted façade anyways. You humans always do get corrupted by power, after all."

She shouldn't. Eloise knows she shouldn't. Shadow is wrong. Thomas isn't... he's not a bad man. He's a good man who doesn't deserve to be betrayed. And yet... and yet, Eloise stares down at her father's changed face and feels the first flickers of hope she's felt in months. There's a cure. A possibility that she'll get to actually speak with her dad again, that he doesn't have to die.

The worst part is... she's not even sure that Thomas would blame her for this. She can almost imagine him smiling at her in understanding if he ever finds out, telling her that she'd made the right call...

Surely he would understand right? And... it was only some information. It wasn't like she knew much anyways... so what could it really hurt?

"A-Alright... I'll t-tell you whatever you want to know..."

Shadow chuckles beside her, the Dark Elf continuing to card her fingers through Eloise's hair.

"Good girl."

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Thomas is amazed when Eloise tells him that her father actually showed improvement for the first time since he'd become bedridden. It didn't make any sense apparently, the preventative that Arnold the Apothecary was capable of making should have been fatal to anyone who was as far along as the Mayor was.

But Eloise had been desperate enough to try anyways... and the results seemed to speak for themselves because when Thomas had glanced in on Mayor Harper, the man did look better. Still decades older than he should have been, still bedridden and coherent for maybe minutes of the day at most... but he DID look better.

It was just the latest in a long string of good news as far as Thomas was concerned. Combine that with everything else going on, including the kiss from

Eloise, and he really is floating on cloud nine the next morning as he heads to their little training ground with Camilla.

“... You seem to be in an even better mood than usual.”

Chuckling at Camilla’s suspicious tone, Thomas considers for a moment if he can get away with messing with her just a little bit. Then... he decides fuck it, why not.

“Heh, yeah. I suppose I am. Eloise was very grateful, you know?”

He doesn’t look directly at Camilla, but he does see the red head’s eyes narrow out of the corner of his vision.

“Oh?”

“Mmhmm. Between going into the Darkwoods for her and then helping her perform maintenance on the Rotlands Lanterns, she was extremely appreciative. She showed that appreciation to me, as a matter of fact.”

Camilla goes stiff, even as they arrive at their patch of stomped flat dirt and Thomas turns to face her properly from across the makeshift ‘training yard’.

He makes a show of meeting Camilla’s eyes... and then lets his face contort into disgust at the expression he sees on her features.

“What? She kissed me on the cheek, Dame Camilla. What were you thinking? Something perverse?”

To his great amusement, Thomas has the distinct pleasure of watching Camilla’s face go almost as red as her hair. The female knight had definitely thought he meant something perverse with his innuendos and comments... which to be fair, was exactly what Thomas had been going for.

Of course, he feigns indignance and outrage now.

"Honestly, you have quite the filthy mind, don't you? Eloise isn't that kind of woman, as you well know. She gave me a perfectly chaste kiss on the cheek and I have carried that with me all through yesterday into today. So yes, I am in a better mood than usual... especially given her father's improvement as well."

That brings a confused scowl to Camilla's face, even as she fights down her blush to the best of her abilities.

"Tch... that still doesn't make sense. You don't just cure Rot Lung when its as advanced as Mayor Harper's is. Something isn't right about that..."

Thomas rolls his eyes and lifts his training spear.

"Well, from where I'm standing it's perfectly alright. If we really can cure the Mayor by having Eloise deliver a careful schedule of doses to her father, then I say it's worth a shot. Even if it means we go back into the Darkwoods again earlier than planned, I don't mind one bit. Do you, Dame Camilla?"

That last question makes her straighten up and huff at him, his words prickling her pride just as intended.

"I will not shy away from my duties. Letting you enter the Darkwoods alone would be... a dereliction of my responsibilities. Yes, I will accompany you again if it is necessary. Though I must say, if you're doing this all so that you can get into that poor woman's skirts..."

Thomas rolls his eyes, deciding not to take too much offense to Camilla's insinuation. At least this time she doesn't sound like she completely means it. In fact, her tone is inquisitive rather than judgmental, like she really is trying to figure him out at this point and doesn't quite know what to make of him.

"Yes. That's why. I'm risking life and limb, not to mention potentially catching a magical disease, all to bed Eloise. Oh, and on top of that I'm throwing myself into hard labor day in and day out after letting you wallop on me each morning. All because I want to seduce Eloise."

He speaks sarcastically and even Camilla is able to pick up on that fact, thankfully. The corner of her mouth even twitches a little, like she's not sure whether she's allowed to be amused or not. In the end, she doesn't smile or laugh... but she does tilt her head to the side, even as she lifts her sheathed sword up as well.

"Let us begin. Still... as we fight, why DO you do all of this? What is your goal at this point, Young Lord?"

She doesn't say it as an accusation. Maybe that's why, even as Thomas lunges at her and Camilla easily blocks his spear, he speaks. Despite only having trained with her for a short time, he's already made enough progress that he's not eating dirt from the first blow. Or perhaps that's just because Camilla has actually learned a little bit of how to train someone and has stopped beating him down quite so quickly.

Either way, as they exchange a few blows, he gives her an answer.

"I should think that obvious at this point. I aim to be self-sufficient. Helping Eloise and Last Hope is certainly a benefit, but the truth of the matter is simple... I was not capable of much of anything when I first arrived in this place. Now... I am. And I will become more capable still, so long as I stick to my current path."

Camilla slowly nods at this... before promptly tripping him up and sending him to the ground again. As she looms over him, she hums.

"Your progress has been... not insubstantial so far, Young Lord."

Heh, Thomas knew it too. He grins as he climbs back to his feet, ignoring any soreness or aching and hopping in place to make sure he's still loose and ready for action. Then, he gets back into his stance, a stance that has begun to feel more and more natural as the days have gone by.

"I'm just getting started too. Before long, you won't be doing all of the heavy lifting when we go into the Darkwoods... I'll be able to pull my own weight. But for now... I know I still need a lot more training. So let's get to it, shall we?"

There's a considering look in Camilla's eye... before she finally nods and they do exactly that. Is it just Thomas' imagination, or does she really feel like she's coming around to him bit by bit, day by day? Maybe he's just going crazy. Or maybe she's finally starting to accept that he's not the monster she believed him to be.

Not because the original Thomas Marlow wasn't a monster, mind you... but because he isn't the original Thomas Marlow. That would be a bit too big of a pill to swallow, however. He's not sure how things would go if he tried to tell anyone that particular bombshell of a truth.

Still... as they fight and Thomas improves little by little; he remains in high spirits. Things are really starting to look up...

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A/N: Well, Eloise *tried* to stand up to Shadow. Alas...

Please let me know what you think either on Patreon or Discord! Your feedback, suggestions, and ideas for this story are keeping the inspiration flowing in a big way!