

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

A/N: Explaining 'The Plan' to Anna.

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“Don’t get me wrong, I’m glad you were victorious Thomas... but leaving eight thousand Dark Elves on our doorstep after everything they’ve done to us... it’s going to be a tough sell.”

Anna tries not to be too overly critical. After all, without her husband and King’s decisive action, they would probably be dead by now. That Thomas had figured out where their enemy was hiding and managed to reach them before they realized their plan wasn’t working and decided to do something more... final... well, it was beyond impressive.

And she was glad to hear that Synestra was dead, even if it had cost poor Qyvern his life. The First Princess of the Dark Elves deserved to die after everything she’d done to the Kingdom... to say nothing of how much Anna personally wanted her dead for the role she’d played in the slaying of Anna’s father.

On top of all of that, hearing Thomas tell the story, having him explain the events of the day to her... it did sound to Anna like he hadn’t had much else in the way of options. Sure, he could have let Sevvie go, sending her back to her mother with her sister’s army in order to get every last Dark Elf out of their lands.

But from the sound of things, that would be feeding Sevvie to the wolves. The Dark Elf simply wasn’t cut out for leadership and she knew it. Being promoted to First Princess by her mother wasn’t a reward no matter what the Dark Elf Queen believed... it was a death sentence.

More than that, Sevvie had done enough for all of them that forcing her to return to her people was a betrayal too far. She’d healed Anna, she’d ensured proof of

House Godman's crimes reached her father's hands, and now she'd killed her own sister to save Thomas and end the war that Synestra had started.

All in all, they owed Sevvì quite a lot, both on a personal level and on a royal level. And yet... even still...

Thomas at least has the good sense to grimace, knowing that he's dumped a bit of a mess in her lap.

"I know it's not ideal, Anna. But we do have a plan, of sorts."

Anna arches a brow at that, but waves a hand for him to go on. She's more than willing to hear him out, even if the situation seems a mite beyond 'not ideal' to her.

"First and foremost, we're keeping them in the Rotlands but also having them relocate. Specifically, I want to relocate them to the section of the Rotlands closest to the border of the Darkwoods... near Last Hope but far enough away to hopefully keep any issues from popping up. This will allow them to get their own food from the Darkwoods while also staying away from the vast majority of our population."

That... wasn't half bad. It certainly solved the issues of logistics. Such as 'where in the world were they supposed to put an entire army of elves, plus how were they supposed to feed them? If they could be self-sufficient, that was one less problem. But it was far from the only one.

"What of the problem of perception though? We've spent months now harping on the Dark Elves, making it clear to every single one of our subjects that Sevvì was the only good one of the bunch and that there was an army coming to kill all of us. Now that same army is just... sticking around? People aren't going to be happy about that no matter where you put them or how you source their food."

Thomas grimaces again and nods, acknowledging her words.

“Yes... which is why I want us to use them instead. Specifically, I want us to use them to clean up the Rotlands.”

Oh? Anna starts to perk up as she considers that idea. It honestly hadn't crossed her mind and now she feels a little foolish. Because yes, there's something there... something worth exploring. Thomas has explained to her all of their discoveries. From finding the origin of the Rot under Last Hope to learning that the blue lanterns produced in the town were capable of killing it.

Now that Synestra was dead and the looming threat of annihilation had passed, they could actually start focusing their attention on the idea of reclamation. They had an entire half of their Kingdom thought lost to Rot that could, ostensibly, be recovered now. And...

“They would certainly help in that regard. The sheer amount of work that will need to be done to clear the Rotlands... would go a lot faster with eight thousand elves who all had the Gift of Shadow.”

Thomas nods along, grinning a little bit now that she seems to be warming to the idea.

“That's exactly right. As things stand, we only have a couple dozen humans with the Gift of Shadow. They were barely enough for us to stop Synestra from spreading Living Rot to the rest of the Kingdom, but relying on them to find the Living Rot under the Rotlands would take years... if not longer. But if we could mix our forces, if we could have Dark Elves and humans working side by side... not only would it speed up the reclamation a hundred times over, it might just help to repair the damage done by Synestra.”

He was definitely onto something. There was just one other major issue that Anna saw with this whole thing.

“... How can we trust them to help us though? You explained to me that they can't exactly go back home because they all witnessed their Queen doing something she would have them killed for seeing... but what's stopping them from cutting and running here and now? If we relocate them to the edge of the

Darkwoods, won't they just run off and look for somewhere else to settle in those woods?"

A human army in the same set of circumstances certainly wouldn't remain half as cohesive. There would already be hundreds if not thousands of deserters... and those deserters would in turn have turned to banditry and skullduggery, filling the countryside.

Anna knows all about that from her reading. It had all happened plenty of times hundreds of years ago before House Ashwood became the ruling Royal Family and established one unified Human Kingdom. Stories of such were rather common in the history books.

Thomas is shaking his head though.

"No, while your concern is valid... Dark Elves are just... different, in the end. Sevvie has explained it to me and while it's hard to wrap my head around, I can't deny the evidence of my own two eyes. Put simply, they're all too damn brainwashed by their culture and their traditions to consider running away."

Anna narrows her eyes.

"But didn't you tell me about Sevvie and her friends doing exactly that? You're saying not a single one of these eight thousand elven soldiers feels the same way?"

"That's what I'm telling you, yes. Even when Sevvie and her friends ran away... it was more Sevvie doing the running than anything else. The rest of them merely followed her lead, as they were supposed to given her status as their Princess. And with the Queen's secret backing, it was never truly a break from their society so much as a... vacation of sorts."

A vacation that ended with all of them eaten by a giant spider from what Anna had heard, but she knows better than to mention that. Instead, she takes what Thomas is saying and tries her best to understand. He's right though, it's rather hard to 'wrap her head around', as he'd said.

“Furthermore, this particular army has reason to be grateful to us for... well, shielding them from an incensed Queen who accidentally outed herself in front of all of them.”

Right, there was that bit as well. Apparently, the Dark Elf Queen had said something unwise in front of all of them. Though perhaps unwise was too weak a word. Still...

“Well. Even if some of them do eventually desert, the sheer value in having however many we can hold onto helping us would probably make up for it. Them cleaning up the Rotlands is the least they can do to make up for their crimes... and maybe one day, they can actually live alongside of us, I suppose. But only if they leave their outdated thinking behind and assimilate properly. I’m not about to have their perverse misandry corrupting our Kingdom.”

Thomas chuckles, inclining his head.

“A fair concern, my Queen. And I’m in full agreement... so is Sevv. We’ll be working on seeing if we can’t perhaps break the brainwashing over time. Just have to be careful...”

Right. Because on the one hand, they were relying on the Dark Elves’ overreliance on tradition and serving Royalty to keep them in line. On the other hand, they couldn’t let elven traditions completely override human culture... especially not when the vast majority of these Dark Elves now in their lands would still be alive in a hundred years while every living human would be dead.

Anna finds herself falling into a contemplative silence with Thomas for a moment... only to look over and see him still frowning. Furrowing her brow, she calls to him.

“Thomas? What’s wrong?”

Grimacing, Thomas looks like he might not answer for a moment... before letting out a sigh and shaking his head.

“I suppose... I’m worried about us.”

Anna blinks, caught off guard by the admission. What was he talking about?”

Us? Whatever do you mean?”

Gesturing between them, Thomas huffs.

“I mean our marriage... you and me as Queen and King, as wife and husband. I worry that you rushed into things and now that the crisis is averted, I worry that you’ll come to regret making me your partner in all of this.”

Anna’s mouth opens... and then closes. She processes his words for a moment before frowning herself, a dark clenching in the pit of her stomach making it hard to get the words out.

“Do you... regret it? Do you feel like we rushed into things? Do you regret becoming my husband?”

Thomas immediately looks at her with wide eyes.

“What?! No! Of course not! You’re a beautiful, wonderful woman, Anna... and you make a fine Queen too. I’m doing my best to keep up with you and to make sure you stay safe, I just worry that I’m not enough for you... not right for you.”

Relief flows through her, the dark clenching in her gut dissipating in a single moment. He wasn’t saying he had regrets... rather, he was just wondering if she might eventually come to dislike or even resent him for having to share the throne with him.

Coming to a decision quite quickly, Anna rises to her feet and walks over to Thomas. Then, she promptly climbs into his lap. He grunts in surprise, his hands going to her hips to help steady her as she straddles him and loops her arms around his neck.

Her lips find his lips a moment later and she kisses him deeply, applying her tongue quite swiftly. After a beat, Thomas applies his own tongue right back, the two of them kissing each other hungrily for several long moments as they share in one another's warmth.

When they finally have to come up for air, Anna pulls back but looks him in the eye, her chest heaving a bit.

"If you think I will ever regret marrying you and making you my King, Thomas, you have another thing coming. I wouldn't even have a Kingdom if not for you. But more than that... you are the only man I could ever see myself being happy with. I had no wish to rule alone like my father did... and with you by my side, I will never have to."

Thomas stares at her, mouth open but no words coming out... until suddenly he pulls her in close and kisses her again. Anna squeaks in surprise but also moans in pleasure, happy to kiss him right back as they return to locking lips for a good long while.

Until eventually, Thomas' mouth begins to trail down from her lips, across her chin, to her neck. And then... lower still. Anna gasps as things begin to take a turn for the intimate.

"Oh Thomas..."

She'd meant every word to be fair. She would never regret making him her partner. And Thomas ensures she continues to feel that way for at least the next hour as the two... vigorously enjoy each other's company.

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A/N: Just a heads up, we're officially winding down now. I'm expecting to end this story on Chapter 90 at this point!

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!