

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

A/N: Making a choice.

-x-X-x-

“What... what do we do now?”

Hours later, after the bodies are disposed of, Thomas sits with the others in the Mayor’s House, fiddling with Sol Godman’s signet ring. The ring and his Guard Captain’s Magic Steel Sword are the only two items they’ve kept after giving rid of the corpses.

The Magic Steel is a no brainer... such a resource is too valuable to just bury in a grave with its owner. The signet ring though... one might assume that keeping it would be foolish. After all, it was evidence of Sol’s murder, wasn’t it? Except... Thomas saw it differently. The signet ring had been how Sol paralyzed him, the hidden needle popping out of the band to prick him in the nape of the neck.

It was proof that the Heir of House Godman had been up to no good, using poisons and what not. It might just be the evidence that Thomas needed to prove that the man had struck first... to whoever he might have to prove it to one day.

Eloise’s words hang in the air for a moment but nobody else in the room seems to know how to respond. Sevvu just looks to him, Camilla is still lost in her own world, and Mayor Harper simply grimaces. In the end... Thomas lets out a sigh.

“... I need to return to the Capital.”

Camilla jolts, wide eyed at his announcement. Mayor Harper’s grimace becomes rather pained. He’d likely come to the same conclusion and just hadn’t wanted to be the one to say it. Meanwhile, Eloise squawks in dismay.

“W-What? Why?!”

Thomas gestures in the direction they'd buried the bodies.

"The Heir of a Noble House is dead and someone will eventually come looking for him and his men. I've already thought long and hard about this... if I stay, whoever comes after him will likely want me dead just as much as he did. And they'll bring a lot more fighters with them. I can't promise I'll be able to protect Last Hope from them."

Sevvi scoffs.

"We could protect this town against an army if they were all as weak as that. You, me, and the knight. Easily."

Thomas smiles slightly at the Dark Elf's confidence. Camilla, meanwhile, chokes on her own spit.

"Those men weren't weak! Or at least... Lord Godman's Captain wasn't. Renault Correl... they called him The Viper. He was dangerous. *Very* dangerous."

Thomas arches a brow while Sevvi says what he's thinking, her arms crossed over her chest.

"And yet you dealt with him easily, didn't you?"

Camilla looks uncertain about that, biting her lower lip.

"I-I mean... I dealt with him, yes. But I don't know about easy. He... we cannot allow ourselves to underestimate Lord Thomas' enemies."

Camilla is right. Sevvi is right too, at least a little bit. Thomas had seen this 'Renault' fellow... he only had one wound on him and Camilla had come away uninjured. To hear Camilla tell it, he'd tried to ambush her as well and it had simply... failed.

So yes, compared to him, Sevv, and Camilla, the men Sol Godman had brought with him *were* weak. However...

"Camilla is correct. There's too much at stake to underestimate our enemies. Say we stay here in Last Hope and get ready to fight off whoever comes here next... maybe we can take on an army, just the three of us. But we can't be everywhere at once. People on our side would inevitably get hurt. Residents of Last Hope would get hurt. I can't let that happen if there's something I can do to stop it."

Sevv falls quiet, watching him with hooded eyes and offering no rebuttal. Camilla nods along with his words, her own eyes shining with pride at his 'honorable' stance. Eloise though...

"B-But why go back to the Capital where you know you have enemies waiting for you? Why not just... go somewhere else entirely?"

Camilla stiffens at that and Thomas can tell that the red head finds that idea particularly objectionable. He's not surprised that she would though. After all, there's certainly nothing 'honorable' about turning tail and running like Eloise is suggesting. Even if it is the option most likely to let him keep his life.

But truth be told... Thomas doesn't give two shits about honor. This is pragmatism, plain and simple.

"If we do that, then we leave Last Hope defenseless. Someone WILL eventually come looking for Lord Godman... and for me. You lot might be able to convince them that Sol never showed up or that you have no clue where I've gone but 'given how quick Sol was to order his thugs to ready themselves for raising Last Hope to the ground... that's not something we can risk.'"

For a moment, he sees it in his mind's eye. Last Hope burning while the wails of its women filled the air. No. He wouldn't let that happen if he could help it. Shaking his head both to clear his mind of the imagery and to make his point all the clearer, Thomas sighs.

“No. Our best bet is for me to... return home. I can go to the Capital and claim that Camilla and I left Last Hope the moment that her tome burned, signaling that something happened to the Master Tome back with House Marlow. Then, we can claim that we came across Sol’s carriage on the road, raided and looted by bandits with no survivors.”

That would also justify them having Sol’s signet ring and Renault’s Magic Steel sword, in the end. A flimsy excuse maybe. But...

“Most importantly of all, this will take all eyes off of Last Hope. Even if they don’t believe us, even if my enemies continue to try to strike against me... they won’t care about some small town on the edge of nowhere. Last Hope will be left in peace.”

It was a good plan in Thomas’ humble, completely unbiased opinion. There were really just a couple of things wrong with it... but they were things that couldn’t be helped.

For one, Thomas wouldn’t be ‘returning’ anywhere. He’d be venturing to the Kingdom’s Capital for the first time in his memories, traveling into the complete unknown after spending the first half a year in this new world here in Last Hope. What the Capital was like, what he could expect to find there... Camilla could tell him as much as she knew, but even then it wasn’t likely to be enough.

That lack of knowledge meant it was almost certain that he would be walking right into a trap. After all, he knew from Sol that he was always the patsy, the one set to take the fall and then die by poisoning himself. But in the end, he was just a piece on the board. It was House Marlow that was the real target all along.

For two, it would mean leaving Eloise behind. He couldn’t expect her to go with them, after all. Camilla and Sevvie were sworn to him so where he went, they would follow. Sevvie would probably have to hide her ears a bit better and that would likely be quite uncomfortable for her, but it was what it was.

Eloise though... her life was here in Last Hope with her father and the other townsfolk. He would not seek to tear her away from it... so this would likely have

to be goodbye because Thomas had no clue if he would ever be able to return or not.

“A-Alright... when do we leave?”

Thomas blinks, pulled out of his thoughts by Eloise’s voice. He stares at the mousy brunette blankly for a moment, registering her determined expression but taking a shameful amount of time to fully process her words. Before he can respond, her father cuts in for him, his voice sounding pained.

"Eloise..."

It’s immediately clear that the Mayor doesn’t want his daughter to go... and equally clear as she rounds on him that she’s not going to be swayed away from this course.

“Don’t try to change my mind, papa. If Lord Thomas is going, I’m definitely going as well. I have to. He saved the lives of everyone in this town multiple times! He’s fought and bled for us!”

She jabs a thumb in Sevv’s direction.

“He even got her to cure you when all hope seemed lost!”

Mayor Harper frowns, clearly not having an immediate argument for why Eloise should stay. In the face of his silence, Eloise softens and moves to take his hands in her own.

“... If you were still dying or about to die, I wouldn’t consider it father. I’d stay and make sure Last Hope stayed strong in your place. But... you’re better now. Stronger. Last Hope is in good hands... *your* hands. And thanks to all of Lord Thomas’ help, the town is better off than it ever was before. But Lord Thomas needs help... so I can’t stay.”

Finally bending under the weight of his daughter’s beliefs, Mayor Harper looks away, offering a single frustrated nod of acknowledgment. Of course, it’s around

then that Eloise realizes she doesn't just have to convince her father to let her go... she also has to convince Thomas to bring her with.

Turning away from the Mayor, Eloise looks Thomas in the eye and bites her lower lip.

"Please... I couldn't stay behind knowing that the three of you were going to the Capital just to save this town. Let me come with, even if it's just as a maid. I'll join your household, I'll cook your meals, I'll clean your clothes, I-!"

Thomas cuts her off with a raised hand as she lists all the things she can do for him as a servant. Shaking his head, he frowns.

"Eloise... if you were to come with us, you would not come as a servant. I would never want that."

Eloise blushes and a small smile appears on her lips as she looks down at the ground, shuffling from foot to foot. Only...

"You had better call her a servant though... my lord."

Mayor Harper's sharp voice cuts through the air, forcing Thomas to give the man his full attention. Sitting up in his chair, the older man gazes at Thomas with a singularly intense stare.

"Anything else and those noble folk in the Capital will have questions, won't they? If she's going to go with you... make her a servant of House Marlow. Should afford her some protection... and if the worst comes to pass, they might even let her come back home to me."

That... was fair. An unattached female commoner traveling with a nobleman was an oddity, especially if she didn't have any sort of role in his household. But a servant... if they played their cards right, Eloise would probably be overlooked entirely by his enemies.

Hopefully, anyways. And as the Mayor was insinuating, even if Thomas was ultimately killed by whoever lay in wait in the Capital, Eloise might still get away... and be allowed to get away even, especially if they thought she was nobody special.

Slowly, Thomas nods, looking back to Eloise.

“Alright then. But we’ll only be doing it as a ruse. I don’t want things between us to change, Eloise. You can be my maid or cook or whatever to everyone else... but you’re so much more than that to me. I hope you know that.”

Eloise blushes harder and quickly nods. Thomas, meanwhile, is very aware that he’s saying this right in front of the young woman’s father. But the Mayor doesn’t offer any protest... by now, the older man probably knows that Thomas and Eloise have *that* sort of relationship. If he was going to object, he would have already.

With that settled, Thomas looks to Camilla and Sevvì with an arched brow.

“Any objections from the two of you?”

Sevvì rolls her eyes.

“I actually am your servant, as you well know. I don’t get to object. Though I suppose I will have to stay hidden most of the time, won’t I? Hm, or maybe you could dress me up as one of your human maids as well and treat me as an exotic novelty. They won’t ever expect the blades beneath my skirts.”

Thomas pauses as he contemplates *that* mental image for a long moment. It’s not... the worst idea? Or is he just thinking with his lower head here...

He shakes himself out of it a moment later and looks to Camilla. He’s not surprised when the red head straightens up and shakes her head vehemently.

“I have no objections Lord Thomas. I think you are correct... facing your enemies, be they your House’s enemies or your own personal enemies... it’s the

only option at this point. Otherwise they will keep coming after you. I swear I will defend you to the best of my abilities with both my life and my blade.”

Smiling slightly, Thomas nods.

“I know you will, Camilla.”

With that, it's settled. They're going to the Capital, the four of them. Whatever they find there, it's not likely to be pretty...

Thomas had always known that he would eventually leave Last Hope behind. As much as he liked the townsfolk, he couldn't imagine himself staying there forever, not with this new lease on life he'd gotten. But he certainly would have preferred it to be on his own terms rather than being pushed to this by circumstances outside of his control.

What had happened to House Marlow back in the Capital that caused the destruction of the Master Tome? What were the long term ramifications of Sol Godman's death?

Somehow, Thomas knew he would get the answers to those questions soon enough... whether he liked it or not.

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A/N: Hm, what do you guys think? Is taking the fight to the enemy the right call?

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!