

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

**A/N: Eloise!**

**-x-X-x-**

“Lady Harper, the reports from the outer farms have arrived.”

Looking up from her work, Eloise hums.

“Excellent, Katherine. Put them down on my desk and then you can go for the day.”

Blinking, the younger woman steps forward, setting the sheaf of parchments down in their proper place before hesitating briefly.

“Ah... are you sure milady?”

Smiling softly, Eloise nods.

“I am. Spend the rest of the day with your family. Give your husband and your son my best.”

“I-I will, milady!”

With that, the younger woman rushes out of the room, as if afraid that Eloise will change her mind at the last second. The brunette does not do so of course, merely watching Katherine go with a faint smile before returning to her work. As she checks over the reports from the outer farms, eyes tracing back and forth across each parchment page, she can't help but reflect on everything.

It's been a year since Synestra was defeated and killed. A year since the war with the Dark Elves had ultimately failed to materialize in the way anyone expected it to. But they'd survived all the same... and things couldn't go back to the way they were before anyways.

Last Hope's transformation into a fortress had not ceased simply because it turned out that the Dark Elf Army they were preparing for had been behind their lines all the time. After all, for all that Thomas had managed to get a verbal treaty out of the Dark Elf Queen that should have protected them for the next one hundred years... you couldn't rely on such things and he knew that full well.

As such, the border with the Darkwoods, essentially their border with the Dark Elf Kingdom itself even if it was MUCH deeper into the forest, was of paramount importance to keep as safe and protected as ever. Rather than stopping Last Hope's build up, they'd actually accelerated things... and a year later, the town Eloise had grown up in and spent most of her life in was completely and utterly unrecognizable.

There was a castle and walls and cobbled streets. There were hundreds if not thousands of new residents, with some more arriving every day. The fears that had plagued Last Hope back in the day were replaced by concerns about growing too big too fast and how they were to handle all the new arrivals and new infrastructure.

Things weren't perfect, of course. Eloise's father was getting on in the years and despite surviving Rot Lung, he probably wouldn't live forever. More so, Eloise herself didn't have the Gift of Leadership that he did, so even though he left most things to her, she sometimes felt inadequate in that regard.

And yet... and yet, she was still managing it. Even with a simple Gift of Cooking, she was still Lady Harper of House Harper, the ruling House of Last Hope and its surrounding area. She was still doing everything she could to make sure everything ran smoothly... and so far she was succeeding, as crazy as that sounded.

With the Rotlands having been pushed back dramatically from where they'd once encroached, Last Hope's farmland had expanded massively in every direction, providing the food that the burgeoning city needed to survive.

At the same time, there were multiple expeditions into the Darkwoods every week, with people seeking out a wealth of different things... and aiming to eventually learn enough about the Darkwoods to conquer it and expand further into it. Perhaps one day, they would actually share a proper border with the Dark Elf Kingdom as a result of said expansion.

Eloise was well aware that the rest of the Kingdom was undergoing a similar sort of renaissance and expansion, all thanks to the King and Queen's efforts, but she took no small amount of pride in believing that Last Hope stood at the forefront of all of that. More fortresses would likely be built along the edge of the Darkwoods going forward as more of the Rotlands were reclaimed and people began to settle all over the place again, but it would be Last Hope that would stand as the 'blueprint', as Thomas liked to call it.

Ah... Thomas. Eloise would be lying if she said she was happy being so far from him. Her ruling here in Last Hope while he ruled as King. Part of her would have been content spending the rest of her life at his side as one of his servants in truth, rather than as part of some gambit to hide her true value to him.

But no... such things were not in the cards. And Eloise knew she was much more useful to Thomas here, managing Last Hope alongside her father, than she was in the Capital. He had plenty of people to help him in the Capital... but not so many he could rely upon to help him at the border.

Besides, it wasn't like she'd been completely bereft of his company. While Anna had only been able to visit Last Hope once in the past year and Eloise in turn had been able to visit the Capital a single time as well... Thomas was all over the place. He was constantly on the move, spending his time all across the Kingdom, moving faster than any horse could hope to move and spending maybe a day or two in any one single place.

While the majority of his time was still spent in the Capital of course, with Anna to warm the throne and rule as Queen from there, Thomas could be more of a roaming King of sorts, someone who was always there when you needed him.

From what she knew, it gave the Royal Guard no end of headache, mostly because they couldn't keep up with him and he wasn't willing to wait for them. But it did mean that she actually saw him quite often, with Thomas stopping in every month or so to check in on her.

Which is why it's not overly surprising when there's a sudden knock at the door and Eloise looks up to see the King's smiling face looking back at her.

"My King!"

Grinning, Thomas steps into the room even as he shakes his head.

"Please Eloise. It's just us. Just Thomas, yeah?"

Eloise huffs... but she's also come a long way from the Mayor's daughter she was back when they'd first met. She's nobility in her own right now and while that didn't necessarily give her the right to address the King so informally... the fact that they regularly share a bed probably does.

"Thomas then. It's good to see you, as always. Hopefully there's nothing too serious that brings you to Last Hope?"

Thomas is quick to shake his head.

"No need to fret, this is a perfectly routine visit. I found myself nearby, just like I always do."

Ah, right. That was one of the main reasons Thomas managed to make it to Last Hope so often, even as he spent so much of his time on the move running around the Kingdom at inhuman speeds.

The Dark Elves that had been left stranded in their lands after Synestra's death had originally been made to camp in the Rotlands close to the border with the Darkwoods so they could supply themselves. This had put them relatively close to Last Hope. Not so close as to cause problems, but it did make Last Hope the closest human settlement to their camp.

That said, these days the Rotlands no longer existed in this part of the Kingdom altogether. The land that the Dark Elves lived on was no longer Rotted and they no longer relied on a steady stream of lanterns to protect themselves from the Rot's detrimental effects.

They were still doing their part to help clean up the rest of the Rotlands of course, and with their help, it was believed that there wouldn't even be any Rotlands anymore by the end of this next year. In the meantime though, in observance of their service so far, they'd been allowed to turn their original camp into a permanent settlement, which of course meant Thomas constantly checking on them... more specifically, checking on Sevvi.

"How is Sevvi doing, exactly?"

Thomas chuckles ruefully at that.

"As well as can be considered. She told me to tell you she'll be by within the next few days for another visit."

Eloise can't help but smile. Sevvi had never wanted to be a Princess... and yet after a taste of serving Thomas as his maid, she'd found herself forced back into the position somewhat, even if at least they'd managed to keep her from being forced all the way back home.

Still, the Dark Elves needed a leader... someone who Thomas and Anna could trust that would keep them in check. Sevvi, for all that she just wanted to be Sevvi and hated being First Princess Sevinarya, was that leader.

To keep her from going entirely insane in the position, Thomas visited frequently and of course, Sevvi used her Gift of Shadow to come by Last Hope and see Eloise at least once a week. In fact, Sevvi had been to see Eloise literally two days ago... for her to already be longing for her next visit made it clear she was feeling a bit stressed out.

Tilting her head to the side, Eloise hums.

“I suppose you won’t be able to stick around long enough to be here when she does visit, will you?”

Thomas grimaces at that, shaking his head.

“Sorry, I’m afraid I need to head back to the Capital in the morning. Anna will need me in the coming days and I promised her I would be there for her.”

Eloise’s eyes widen as she remembers.

“Oh! That’s right... is she getting close now then?”

Smiling once more, Thomas nods.

“Yes, any time in the next month from what she’s said in our messages to one another. I can’t risk missing the birth of my first child... so I’ll be staying in the Capital until she gives birth after this. Heh, hopefully the rest of the Kingdom can manage without me for a couple months.”

Eloise should hope so! On all accounts! Thomas was right, he definitely needed to be there for Anna when the Queen gave birth. And the Kingdom would just have to handle its own problems in his absence because his newborn child deserved at least a little bit of time with their father.

Though the mention of the Queen’s pregnancy being so close to an end does remind Eloise of something she’s been putting off asking of Thomas. Only recently did she finally work up the courage to get the Queen’s blessing... and Anna had given it, magnanimous monarch that she was. So now... all that was left was to pop the question to Thomas.

“Ah... on the subject of children, Thomas...”

Blinking, he looks at her curiously.

“Yes?”

Biting her lower lip, Eloise squirms for a moment before finally blurting it out.

“Would you be willing to provide me with one?”

There’s a pause at that, before Thomas arches a brow.

“Provide you with one? I’m not quite sure what you mean, Eloise. What do you need a child for, exactly? I definitely shan’t be simply snatching them off the street for you, that’s for sure.”

For a moment she’s gobsmacked by his seeming obtuseness. Then, belatedly, Eloise realizes she’s teasing him... and it dawns on her from his lack of surprise that he was already expecting this question.

“You... the Queen told you, didn’t she?”

Thomas offers an apologetic smile.

“There are no secrets between me and Anna, Eloise. Apologies, but yes she talked to me about your request. We made our decision together... which yes, does mean that her approval is also my approval.”

Eloise straightens up at that, her heart swelling with elation. Her father definitely wasn’t having another child before his time came to an end after all. And Eloise... didn’t really intend to marry ever. So ultimately... this was her only way of continuing her family line. Which was now a noble family line of all things.

“Then... please my King. If you wouldn’t mind... could we start trying tonight before your departure in the morning?”

Thomas smiles at her tenderly and Eloise’s heart thumps harder in her chest.

“Eloise... it would be my pleasure.”

Needless to say, they don't get much sleep that night. But Eloise can't bring herself to mind all that much...

**-x-X-x-**

**A/N: Time is marching onwards~**

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