

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

A/N: Eloise Time!

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Its funny, when Eloise left home... she wasn't sure if she would ever be returning. Certainly she had girded herself for the possibility of it being years before she ever saw Last Hope or her father again. Worst case scenario, it might have been the last time she saw her father altogether because even cured of the Rot Lung, he was still getting on in the years.

So yes, returning to Last Hope a mere month and a half after she'd left was not within her expectations. But to be fair, quite a lot had happened in the past month and a half. Most of it had happened in the first week that they'd arrived in the Capital!

Still, this was important. Of that much, Eloise was certain. Even if she was still less than certain about her own capability, she was very confident that it had to be done... and if Thomas trusted her with this, then she had to trust herself.

And so, as Eloise finds herself arriving back in the town of her birth at the head of a massive caravan of soldiers and laborers and everyone else they would need to begin fortifying their border while also extracting the resources required from the Darkwoods... she holds her head high and watches as her father approaches from the edge of town.

The look on his face is trepidation manifest at first, though when he lays eyes on her, he's more baffled than anything. Her father just stares at her, even as Eloise walks up to him and gives him a hug and a quick peck on the cheek.

"Hello again, father."

Last Hope's Mayor looks from her to the caravan and back again, completely and utterly bewildered.

“Eloise... what’s going on here?”

Smiling slightly, Eloise holds up a finger.

“One moment.”

Then, she turns back to the people behind her and calls out to them.

“Everyone can take a moment to rest now that we’ve arrived! Be ready to get started in the next hour though! Make camp outside of town to begin with, and then we’ll go from there!”

It’s a little startling even now to see so many people following her lead. Sure she’d ‘led’ Last Hope back during the months when her father was laid up in bed and dying from Rot Lung, but that was... well, that was more the community rallying around her than anything else. And she certainly wouldn’t have been nearly so successful without Thomas and Camilla’s eventual help.

This was different. This was a small army of folks from all walks of life put under her authority. Technically it was the King and Queen’s authority to be fair, she was just their stand-in... but even still, they’d given her an official noble title and everything. Ah, speaking of which...

“Father. Before I explain I should let you know... you’re looking at Lady Eloise Harper of House Harper now.”

She beams as her father’s eyes bulge and his jaw drops open in disbelief. Giggling, Eloise gives a little curtsy.

“And of course, you are now Lord of House Harper. The town of Last Hope and the surrounding lands belong to our House now.”

There was more room in the nobility than ever before these days. And with Thomas becoming King, the lands of House Marlow had fallen under the control of the Crown, becoming his and Anna’s to give away as they saw fit.

“E-Eloise... back up, please... my heart can only handle so much shock. Explain from the beginning if you can!”

Ah... fair enough. Eloise’s good humor vanishes in an instant, replaced by concern for her father. Going to his side, taking him by the arm, Eloise supports him with ease.

“Let’s get you somewhere to sit, father. Then I’ll explain everything, I promise. It’s not all good news I’m afraid... but you don’t need to worry. Our King has a plan.”

Her father gives her a deeply concerned look.

“Our *King*, Eloise?”

... Okay maybe he was right and she should just start from the beginning.

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An hour later they’re sat down in the living room of her family home with two cups of tea between them. Her father is looking a little better now... but not by much. He’s taken her story in and seems to be processing it by this point.

Eloise has made sure to tell him everything, this time starting in chronological order. Well, everything except for the more... intimate details. There’s no reason for him to know those sorts of things. Still, she explained what happened when they got to the Capital, how they discovered House Marlow’s destruction and how things had ultimately panned out with King Vincent.

Hearing about House Godman’s crimes and how far they extended beyond simply targeting House Marlow and Thomas had her father shaking his head in disbelief, but learning about what happened in the throne room when Solomon Godman was confronted... that has her father sitting back quietly, struggling to come to terms with it.

Eloise sighs, having gone quiet for a few minutes to let him process... but now she needs to continue on. She can't spend all day here after all, not when there are things to be done.

"After the death of the King, the Princess was set to become Queen. She wound up marrying Lord Thomas, father... he is King Thomas Ashwood-Marlow now, and our liege. In turn, King Thomas has ennobled our family, hence us being Lord and Lady Harper now. And in turn... well, in turn, he requires our help."

Her father is smart and quick on the uptake, so Eloise isn't surprised when his eyes flash knowingly.

"The Dark Elves."

Eloise nods... before hesitating.

"Yes but not just them. There's also the lanterns. Last Hope's lanterns aren't like anywhere else in the Kingdom... we make them ourselves and have never needed to source them from House Godman."

Her father nods.

"Aye and good that we did too, or Last Hope would have ceased to exist long ago. We were too small and unimportant to receive those lanterns you might find deeper into the Kingdom."

Then, understanding dawns on him.

"... House Godman being the source of those lanterns means that their production has likely come to a halt, hasn't it?"

Eloise smiles weakly as she nods.

"Yes. Put simply, the King and Queen were able to seize enough of a stockpile to get us through the next while, but we need to begin producing more of Last Hope's version of the lanterns right away to send them out to the rest of the

Kingdom. That, along with beginning to reinforce Last Hope's defenses, is why I've brought so many people with me."

Her father gives her a knowing look.

"Eloise, if what you told me is true, the Dark Elves are likely to show up long before we can get proper production started."

Eloise winces at that... but nods all the same.

"... Yes father. That's why the caravan I arrived with is only the first of many. There will be another half a dozen arriving over the course of the next week, each with more soldiers than before. And eventually... King Thomas intends to move his entire operation over here."

That gets a sharp gaze from her father.

"This 'training' you mentioned? Where one man is somehow supposed to bring thousands of men up to his level?"

This time, Eloise doesn't wince. Sure, her father might have good reason to be dubious about that, but she knew better. Looking him right in the eye, she nods resolutely.

"Yes father. And he'll do it too. He's overcome every challenge put in front of him so far, hasn't he?"

Her father is quiet for a moment before grunting.

"Our new King's Gift is not one of Leadership, is it?"

Eloise stiffens at that, her eyes widening. She'd known that her father was perceptive, but somehow she hadn't expected him to put two and two together like this.

"... No, it's not. But you mustn't tell anyone..."

She definitely wasn't going to tell her father that Thomas was an Otherworlder. That was effectively a state secret at this point, something kept very, VERY close to the chest. Even fewer people knew about that than knew about Thomas' Gift of Potential at this rate.

Fortunately, her father just chuckles and shakes his head.

"Who would I tell? Beatrice or Lahn? Do not fret, Eloise. I know how to keep a secret. I just hope... well, a father will always want his daughter to be safe, healthy, and happy above all else. Can you say beyond a shadow of a doubt that you're all three of those things?"

Eloise fidgets for a moment.

"W-Well... healthy, yes. And I'm very happy father. I'm glad I went with Thomas to the Capital. I'm glad to be doing what I'm doing for him and everyone now. But safe... none of us will be safe so long as the threat of the Dark Elves looms on the horizon."

That brings a frown back to her father's face.

"... Hm, you're not wrong about that. They'll come for Last Hope first, won't they?"

Wincing, Eloise looks down at her hands.

"Probably. That's why we're putting so much focus here. But they could really attack from anywhere on the border..."

But her father is already shaking his head.

"No... it'll be here. From what you've told me, this 'First Princess' has it out for her sister... the one that gave you so much trouble all those months before finally healing me. Like it or not, our town is connected to that one... and so when the Dark Elves come, they'll come for us first."

Again, her father's observational skills never fail to amaze her. Slowly nodding, Eloise swallows hard.

"Y-Yes... Thomas agrees. That's half of why I'm here, of course. We're going to be ready for them. Our King will make sure of it. But... at the same time, we need to let the townsfolk know so they can make informed decisions. If any of them want to evacuate, if any of them want to move deeper into the Kingdom, Thomas has given me full authority and power to help them do so."

Her father scoffs at that.

"Do you really think any of them are going to want to leave their homes, Eloise? They didn't the last time the town was threatened, they certainly won't now."

But Eloise shakes her head.

"This time is different, father. If we're given enough time, Last Hope is going to be unrecognizable by the time we're done with it. A true fortress, complete with a castle and walls and everything. The stone is already on its way, as well as the builders. I don't know what we'll be able to really build before the Dark Elves arrive... but even when we push them back, the King intends for Last Hope to become the first major line of defense going forward."

"... I see. I suppose that sort of thing comes with being made into a noble house, doesn't it? We can't be Lord and Lady of a small, cozy town with a small townhouse to our name, now can we?"

Eloise chuckles sadly.

"No father... I'm afraid we can't."

With a heavy sigh, her father rises from his chair.

"Well... sounds like we both best be getting to work. Lots to do."

Eloise rises as well, looking to him with some concern. She doesn't want him to strain himself too much... and yet, this is what Thomas had referred to as an 'all hands on deck' situation. They couldn't afford to waste time or sit around waiting for the Dark Elves to arrive. Their enemies were coming... and they needed to use every second to prepare that they possibly could.

As her and her father part ways, Eloise reaches into the satchel she's carrying with her and pulls out a heavy book... a Master Tome. Opening it up, she begins to write on a blank page, sending off a message detailing her arrival in Last Hope and how everything is going well so far.

Almost immediately, she receives a response back. This Master Tome is paired to another Master Tome, an inordinate expense to say the least. But what it means is that it allows for actual instant communication across large distances... albeit only through text rather than actual voice and visual like the Dark Elf Communication Orbs.

The message comes from Anna, since Thomas is undoubtedly busy training the Kingdom's fighters up to his standards.

Well done, Eloise. We both knew you were the right woman for this job. Please keep us updated as to how things proceed from here. The next caravans should arrive in the coming days... and Thomas will be with one of the last few. I only wish I could go with him and be there with you both in Last Hope. I can hardly wait for when we're all reunited again.

Eloise blushes a bit at that last part, memories of the last night before her departure flicking through her mind's eye. It had been her, Thomas, and Anna... and to say that it had been an experience would probably be an understatement.

Still, she can't let herself get distracted by amorous thoughts. It was as Anna said... they would be reunited again eventually... and Eloise would once more find herself appreciating the attentions of a King and Queen who loved far too fiercely sometimes.

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A/N: Next chapter we'll be back to Thomas' POV. Hope people enjoyed these looks into Camilla, Sevi, and Eloise while I also showed how everything was building up behind the scenes~

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!