

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

A/N: Thomas has a surprise for Eloise!

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It's a few more days before he receives excellent news from Arnold. A few more days of getting together with Camilla in the morning so she can beat him up to her heart's content. To her credit, Thomas does actually believe that the Knight Bachelorette is at least trying to 'train' him... he just doesn't think she's a very good teacher.

Or at least, she wouldn't be to anyone normal. Her 'training methods' involve beating him senseless up and down the makeshift 'training yard' that they've carved out for themselves on the edge of town for approximately one to two hours each morning. For anyone with any semblance of a normal physiology, they would never make any progress off of Camilla's teachings.

But for him? For Thomas, things were different. In fact, it seems as though his Gift of Relentless Potential makes him particularly well suited for Camilla's training. Perfectly so, one might say.

In just a few days of morning spars combined with the rest of the physical labors he undertakes each day around Last Hope, Thomas has seen as much progress as he did in his first three weeks in town. He's accelerating, plain and simple, with muscles firming up where he had none previously, and his speed and stamina exploding forward.

It's as though the more adversity he faces, the greater the challenge he must continue striving through, the faster that Thomas can expect to improve. He never stays down. He never stops getting up. And in return, his Gift rewards him, making him stronger by the day.

Regardless, the news from the Apothecary comes just in time too, as it comes up on just over a full month since Thomas found himself in the town of Last

Hope and in this brave new world and body. The Apothecary has finished turning the ingredients from the Darkwoods into precisely the potions Thomas needed, a day before he truly needed them.

As such, Thomas makes sure to inform Camilla that very same night that he won't be available for training in the morning. He expects her to explode at him, to maybe be outraged or furious for 'shirking' her 'generous' training, but to his mild surprise, she just frowns and asks why instead.

When he explains what he intends to do, Camilla's frown disappears, replaced by a blank face and a calculating glint in her eye. In the end though, she simply nods and accepts it, as he suspected her ultimately would. After all, what he was planning was a categorically good thing.

And so Thomas finds himself getting up early the next morning, but rather than seek out Camilla so they can head out to their 'training yard', he seeks out Eloise instead. Finding her already getting herself ready for what she has to do today, Thomas clears his throat.

"Eloise. I have something for you."

The Mayor's daughter has a shawl covering her face, leaving only her eyes visible as she looks at him and blinks.

"Hm? Oh, Thomas. Sorry, I'm afraid I can't offer you any work this morning... I'll be quite busy today."

Smiling, Thomas shakes his head.

"I know. I remember what today is. You told me already, if you recall. Once a month you go and perform maintenance on Last Hope's lanterns, right?"

Eloise blinks again, before slowly nodding.

"Ah... y-yes. I didn't expect you to remember, that conversation was weeks ago..."

Indeed it was. But Thomas hadn't forgotten. How could he when the Rotlands were an ever-present blight just outside of the town and the image of Mayor Harper laid up in bed looking twice his age refused to leave Thomas mind?

No, he hadn't forgotten... and indeed, the trip to the Darkwoods had in part been to try and get a solution worked out before today arrived.

"Like I said before, I have something for you. Here, please take this."

With that, he pulls out one of the potions that the Apothecary had spent the past few days making and holds it out to Eloise. The mousy brunette pauses and stares at the vial for a long moment before reaching out with trembling fingers. Thomas makes sure she has a firm grip before he lets go on his end.

"This is..."

"Yeah. I told you that Camilla and I went into the Darkwoods for Arnold, didn't I? The old man gave me a list. Look, I know there's not much to be done for your father at this point... but that doesn't mean you shouldn't take care of yourself, Eloise. So please, drink up."

The potion that Eloise is holding now is exactly what she believes it to be... the preventative tincture for keeping Rot Lung from settling into the body. It's the potion that Last Hope's aging Apothecary hasn't been able to adequately supply to the town for some years now, resulting in Mayor Harper contracting the otherwise preventable magic disease and ending up in his current state.

As previously mentioned, no amount of this potion will help Mayor Harper at this point. However... Eloise has taken her father's place these past six months, helping to keep Last Hope running and effectively taking on all of the duties of a Mayor. This included the entire reason that her father contracted Rot Lung in the first place... the monthly maintenance of the magical lanterns all along the outskirts of town.

Swallowing audibly, Eloise stares at the vial in her hand and then up at Thomas.

"I... I couldn't possibly use this. Even if you did get enough ingredients for the Apothecary to make a batch, we should save it for... for the children out on the farms. They're always daring each other to run off into the Rotlands... and sometimes if a lantern goes down and we don't notice it, entire families can wind up exposed."

Thomas nods along as Eloise spouts out the same excuse for why she shouldn't take the potion as she'd told him her father gave her all the years HE didn't bother to take what vanishingly small supply of the preventative they still had on hand. He doesn't bother calling Eloise out on the hypocrisy or pointing out that she's being ridiculous. No, by this point Thomas is well aware that Eloise has a bit of a complex.

Instead, he simply pulls out the bundle of the rest of vials he's brought with him from Arnold's place and rolls it out on the table, showing Eloise the dozen or so doses he has on him right now.

"Arnold didn't just make one batch, Eloise... he made five. This is one of them. And if we get low again, Camilla and I will just make our way into the Darkwoods again and do another gathering expedition. So please drink it... for me if not yourself. I did risk life and limb, after all."

Eloise stares at the open bundle of potion vials for a long moment before slowly reaching up and dragging down her shawl. She has a blush on her face and refuses to meet his eyes as she uncorks the first vial that he'd given her and brings it to her lips. After one last moment of hesitation, the brunette knocks it back, swallowing the potion in one go.

There's a brief pause after she does so, silence reigning for a moment. Eloise finally opens her mouth to speak, only for her eyes to go wide, her lips to snap shut, and her cheeks to suddenly expand.

Rushing over to the nearest basin, the poor young woman proceeds to throw up a truly disturbing amount of pitch black gunk. The beginnings of Rot Lung, from what Thomas knew. It was basically proof that Eloise had already been starting

to contract the disease. However, the fact that her hurling only lasts a minute is also a good sign and proof that she didn't have too serious a case of Rot Lung for the potion to be able to deal with.

From what he'd been told, the reason the potion was a preventative and not an outright cure was that by the time Rot Lung fully took root and got to the more advanced stages, taking the potion was more likely to outright kill the afflicted over curing them, because by then the very act of purging would take several minutes and usually result in them throwing up their own lungs in the process.

Grisly to say the least, but as Eloise straightens up, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand and wrinkling her nose at what she's done to the basin in front of her, Thomas can't help but smile. Now she's not in danger anymore... and if he has anything to say about it, she won't be in danger, at least from Rot Lung, ever again.

"T-Thank you, my Lord. You... you didn't have to do any of this for someone like me."

Thomas scoffs.

"And what does that mean, exactly? Someone like you... someone who cares for her community to her own detriment? Someone who deserves to be cared for in turn? Sure, I didn't have to do anything Eloise... but I did it anyways because I wanted to. Now, let's get going."

Blinking in confusion, Eloise furrows her brow.

"Wha- what do you mean?"

Grinning, Thomas reaches down... and pulls his scarf up over his own mouth and nose, leaving only his eyes visible as they crinkle in amusement.

"You're going to teach me how to help you with the monthly lantern maintenance. And when we're done, we'll both take another dose of potion and be right as rain."

“B-But what about your training sessions with the Dame?!”

“Dame Camilla has given me the morning off. I explained that this was more important and she agreed with me.”

Eloise looks flummoxed... it's a rather cute look on her, Thomas decides. Chuckling, he rolls back up the bundle and arches a brow at her.

“Well? Shall we be off?”

In the end, the blushing brunette can only agree, the two of them gathering up the things Eloise says they'll need and then heading out of the house and towards the town's outskirts. Or rather, towards the outskirts of even the farms themselves.

The magical lanterns that ring Last Hope's borders keep the Rotlands at bay, preventing them from completely overwhelming and consuming the town. Meanwhile, the Darkwoods keeps the Rot Lands at bay completely organically with those blue little lights that he and Camilla had seen on their expedition the other day.

Supposedly, there are other better methods for holding back the Rotlands elsewhere in the Kingdom, otherwise Last Hope would probably be a massive trade hub and there would be people going in and out of the Darkwoods constantly to 'harvest' the key ingredient for the lanterns.

But alas, out here in the boonies on the very edge of civilization, the magical lanterns are all that the denizens of Last Hope have. In the end, they're rather lucky to have a solution to be found from within the Darkwoods themselves, otherwise the town would probably have been swallowed up by the Rotlands a long time ago.

The lanterns themselves are... well, Thomas barely understands how they work or function, but he's eager to learn and Eloise is a much better teacher than

Camilla was proving to be so far. Or at least... a much more understanding teacher, anyways.

Ultimately, they go from lantern to lantern, checking them to make sure they're all still functional. It's the ones that are malfunctioning or just not working that are the danger, to be sure. Working on those ones, trying to get them operational again, is the chief way that Mayor Harper had contracted Rot Lung.

Of course, Thomas has a secret curiosity burning inside of him... will he even need the potions to stave off the magical disease? Or was it possible that his Gift of Relentless Potential would eventually make him immune to the negative effects of the Rotlands if he exposed himself to them long enough while continuing to 'strive'?

Obviously, he wasn't so stupid that he was willing to test it by running off into the Rotlands themselves for an extended period of time, but now that they had a large supply of the preventative potion made up, Thomas was more than happy to be Eloise's hands when it came to the monthly maintenance. Having her stay far enough back to be safe while he went forward to handle the lanterns themselves as she called out instructions to him... it seemed like the best way to handle things.

This takes hours, admittedly. They even break for lunch for a bit before returning to finish up the rest of the lanterns before nightfall. But though it's not quite the hard labor or sparring that Thomas has been relying upon to get stronger this past month now, it still feels rewarding in his own way. He didn't build muscle or learn to fight any better today... but he did help Eloise keep Last Hope safe... and he helped Eloise keep herself safe too.

A day well spent, by Thomas' approximation. And so, when they finally make their way back to the house at the end of the day, he has a broad smile on his face, feeling rather pleased with himself and the day's events.

"Lord Thomas..."

Turning his grin towards Eloise, Thomas arches a brow.

“Yes Eloise?”

“T-Thank you...”

He opens his mouth to tell her to ‘think nothing of it’, fully planning to brush it off as no big deal. However, before Thomas can speak, Eloise darts forward... and plants a chaste but nevertheless meaningful kiss on his cheek, stopping him in his tracks.

As his eyes widen and his hand comes up to touch said cheek, Eloise blushes profusely and quickly drops into a curtsy.

“A-Apologies! Good night! And thank you again!”

With that, she scurries away. For a moment Thomas considers going after her... but in the end he decides not to push his luck. Today has, unequivocally, been a great day. His grin reasserts itself as he heads for his bedroom.

It’s really starting to feel like he’s finding his place in this world. And while he doesn’t think he’ll stay in Last Hope forever, he does want to do everything in his power to leave the town better off than he found it. Luckily, so long as Eloise is in charge, Thomas has faith that they’ll continue to do great things together.

She really is the best leader that Last Hope could ask for.

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A/N: D’awww, he got a kiss~

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!