

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

A/N: To the Rotlands!

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They have no way of knowing when Synestra will discover their true capabilities. It's possible she could be finding out how they're stymying her efforts at any moment. Time is most decidedly not on their side.

And so Thomas and company depart from Last Hope a mere hour after the War Council. Enough time for Qyvern to grab his best people who are currently available in camp as well as what supplies can be carried on their persons.

Thomas actually leaves about thirty minutes earlier, because while Qyvern, Sevv, and the other three will be traveling by way of Gift of Shadow, he will be traveling on foot. Fortunately, Thomas traveling on foot is comparable to the speed of a luxurious sports car from his old world at this point.

The landscape blurs as he passes everything by, running at full tilt away from Last Hope. He makes good time, arriving in the next town over just as the others are stepping out of deep shadows on the side of a building. From there, they discuss their next stop and he's off again, racing at truly superhuman speeds to the next destination.

It reminds him of simpler times in a way... back when he was hunting Sevv's nonexistent Spider-Queen, venturing deeper and deeper into the Darkwoods with each passing day. As much as Sevv had put them on a wild goose chase back then, there was no denying that Thomas found himself looking back on that time period with fondness compared to the complexity of the present. Everything was... smaller back in the day.

But alas, there's no point in getting stuck on what had been, nor in bemoaning the current difficulties. All Thomas could do was what he'd always done... and

that was putting one step in front of the other to keep moving forward, no matter what.

If nothing else, running from Last Hope all the way to the Rotlands gets a good burn going, especially as he tries to keep up with fairly long distance shadow teleportation in the process. He pushes himself and by the time they finally reach their destination hours later, Thomas can feel that he's gotten at least a little faster.

Of course, it's not just about getting to the Rotlands. There was a part of the Rotlands literally butting up directly against the farms of Last Hope after all. No, it was about entering the right part of the Rotlands. Half of the Kingdom had been converted into those desolate wastes by what they now knew what enemy action on Synestra's part. Quite a lot of empty land to hide a Dark Elf army in.

But as they'd previously discussed, there was really only one place it made sense for the First Princess to position her forces... close to the Capital, but far enough away to not be detected by any of the observers tasked with making sure the Rotlands weren't encroaching any further than they already had.

And yes, this meant their group was passing quite close to the Capital itself when they finally entered the Rotlands properly. Thomas wanted nothing more than to go to Anna right then and there, to warn his wife and Queen of the potential danger. Or to send one of the others to do it since they could go there and then be back in a few minutes using shadowstep.

There was just one main problem with that... if he was right and the Dark Elves were secretly hiding in the Rotlands close to the Capital, then Synestra would almost certainly have a spy watching the Palace. If they caught wind that anyone was back and visiting the Queen... it might trigger an assassination attempt just as much as the First Princess finding out about that they had a method by which to destroy Living Rot.

And so, ultimately... Thomas had no choice but to leave Anna's safety in Camilla's capable hands when the female knight eventually arrived there with

her unit, hopefully within the next day. They weren't as fast as Thomas, but they were fast enough for this, he believed.

Arriving at the edge of the Rotlands, Thomas looks at the rest of his group and reaches down to activate the blue light lantern at his waist. Wordlessly, all five of the others do the same while also making sure their faces are covered so they're not directly breathing in the Rotted Air.

Thomas puts on his helmet and sighs.

"We'll move as one at first. If we see any signs of them, however, I'll start sending each of you out to investigate. The goal is not to engage, but rather to scout out their location and figure out exactly what we're dealing with. Understood?"

He receives five identical nods at that. Good. Not bothering with any more words, Thomas turns... and takes his first steps into the Rotlands themselves. The desolate wastes that make up a full half of his Kingdom have always been present in the back of his mind, of course. How can they not be?

Every morning back in Last Hope, he would only have to turn and he would see the Rotlands going off into the distance. They weren't as grandiose or breathtaking as looking out at the ever-growing Darkwoods was, but that didn't make the sight any less daunting.

And then, even when he got to the Capital, they were still present. A bit more distant perhaps, but nevertheless visible from the higher up places in the Capital, such as the upper floors of the Palace and the Citadel. A constant reminder of everything that humanity had lost so far.

However, seeing was one thing. Even understanding how the Rotlands came to be was different from actively experiencing them. The blue light lanterns do their job thankfully, but it's still not at all a pleasurable task. And... they have a lot of ground to cover, that's for sure.

The only positive is that no life can survive in the Rotlands. Its dead trees and dead ground for as far as the eye can see in every direction. This is a positive because it makes it easier to see anything out of the ordinary. The only obstructions to one's line of sight are hills and rocky outcroppings and small mountains.

There's no dense foliage to get in the way... though Thomas does allow himself to hope one day there might be. Once they've stopped Synestra. Once they've beaten back the Dark Elves. They can utilize the blue light lanterns to find and kill the Living Rot globules hidden underneath the Rotlands. And they can restore the Kingdom to its former glory in the process.

But first... they have to find the First Princess and her army. Nothing else can be done until Synestra is taken care of.

Which is why its so frustrating when hours of searching turns up nothing, initially. As the sun begins to set, that first day of travel and then scouting yielding no results, Thomas feels a moment of worry that he might actually be wrong. What if the Dark Elves weren't hiding in the Rotlands after all? What if they were in the Darkwoods all this time and just too skilled to be caught.

But no... he couldn't believe that. This made sense. He was certain of it.

Fortunately, they find the first signs of life early on the second day. Movement in the area. Boot prints that weren't their own. It was exactly what Thomas needed. And at that point, he sent out Sevv, Qyvern, and the other three to begin scouting the surrounding environ, allowing them to use their Gift of Shadow to its utmost.

By lunchtime, they've found them. The entire army, camped out on the side of a desolate mountain of Rot. As soon as he receives word, Thomas calls back the others from their own scouting and the six of them set out towards the Dark Elf Encampment at speed.

As they approach though, they slow down and move a bit more carefully, until finally they reach a rocky outcropping that they can use as cover while they

investigate from a distance. What Thomas sees... is enough to take his breath away.

It really is an army, albeit not one the size of anything that he remembered from back home. Populations just seemed smaller in this world in general. His own army numbered in the high four digits in total, representing humanity's entire fighting strength.

Meanwhile, this was *just* the First Princess' army... and from some quick counting on Qyvern's part, it rivaled them in numbers.

"Approximately eight thousand, Your Majesty."

Thomas grimaces, imagining such a force of Dark Elf warriors shadowstepping into the Capital in unison and laying waste to it. The damage would be immense. The death toll, catastrophic. Fuck, if Synestra gave up on her current plan and turned to just sending squads of Dark Elves all over the Kingdom to kill whoever they could find, she might eventually manage to wipe out their ability to rebuild altogether.

The army Thomas had trained might be strong enough to face equal numbers of Dark Elves in open battle... but the First Princess would never allow an open battle to take place. No, once she found out that the Living Rot was being found and dealt with, she would almost certainly turn to other methods of purging humanity from the world.

Thomas wasn't about to let that happen though. His enhanced eyes take in everything carefully and even from this distance, he can see... options. For instance...

"They're using the white lanterns. I suppose we knew those were of Dark Elf design, but I had also assumed they gave a subpar, faulty design to House Godman. It would seem this is the best they could truly come up with though if they're using it as well."

Sevvi nods at the observation.

“It’s likely that my sister only did the bare minimum in that regard. I’m sure she didn’t have her people make the best design for her human lackeys... only something that was functional and would do what they needed it to do. However, that in turn means that now that she herself has reason to come all the way to human lands... she’ll have to make do with that same shoddy equipment. Especially because I’m confident she wasn’t willing to wait for something better to be developed.”

Thomas grunts in agreement. His eyes slide over the placed white lanterns as Qyvern suddenly speaks up.

“Am I blind? I can see no guards whatsoever. Not even a simple patrol.”

No, Qyvern was not blind. Shaking his head, Thomas explains.

“I suspect there are none. After all, consider their position... humans have not stepped foot in the Rotlands for decades. As far as they’re concerned, we’ve written off this entire half of the Kingdom. Why should they have guards when the Rotlands themselves provide a natural defense keeping us away?”

One of Qyvern’s agents, a woman from the sound of her voice, chuckles darkly.

“They’re not expecting us, are they? I love an oblivious mark.”

Thomas can’t help but smile a little at that, the corner of his mouth quirking up in spite of himself. Still, he does turn a slightly admonishing gaze in the agent’s direction.

“Don’t get too confident now. We have the element of surprise, but keep in mind that every single individual in that camp is a warrior with a hundred years under their belts. That obliviousness will probably be the only thing that lets you even win a fight against any them... and even then, it’s not a sure thing.”

One of the other agents grumbles at that, a man this time.

“Then what are we even doing? There’s no way the six of us can take on an army eight thousand strong. If we go in there, we’re dead aren’t we?”

Thomas isn’t the one to answer that. Instead, it’s Seevi. She shakes her head with a grim look in her red eyes, even as she stares out at the encampment.

“No... we just need to cut off the head and the body will be easy to control.”

When quiet disbelief from the others meets her words, Seevi huffs and explains.

“My sister is First Princess, yes. But I am Fourth Princess. I remain Fourth Princess despite all my expectations. My mother never officially disowned me. This means... even if that army is my sister’s to command, they still must consider my authority. In a head to head situation, her orders will always supersede mine of course... but not if she’s dead.”

Qyvern nods, having discussed this with Thomas and Seevi earlier.

“Indeed. That is why we are here. To kill the First Princess so that Seevi can step in and force the rest of the Dark Elves to stand down.”

Silence falls as everyone processes this for a long moment. Finally, the last of the agents grunts and speaks up.

“And what happens if that doesn’t work? What if we kill this First Princess but her troops refuse to stand down?”

Thomas and Seevi share a glance at that. The obvious answer hangs in the air, not spoken out loud but heard, nonetheless. If that was to happen... they would all surely perish. Not even he can fight off an army of eight thousand pissed off Dark Elves.

And yet... what other choice do they have, really? This is it. This is for all the marbles.

“... Luckily for you three, you aren’t going to be part of the mission to assassinate the First Princess. You won’t be in the heart of the camp like Seevi, Qyvern, and I. Instead, you’ll be our distraction. So long as you’re careful, the Dark Elves should never know you’re even there. And should we fail... should we fall in combat, it will be up to you three to get word back to the Capital.”

The three hooded, masked agents all share looks at that before slowly nodding. Thomas outlines what he wants them to do and after a moment, he can see the tension easing from their frames. After all, they have the easy job.

Even still... he wishes them the best of luck. They’ll need it. And so will he, Seevi, and Qyvern...

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A/N: Next up... Synestra POV!

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!