

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

A/N: The aftermath from Eloise and Camilla's POVs!

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Eloise paces back and forth across the floor of her father's study, biting at her lower lip. Her mind is moving even faster than her body is, but its just her thoughts going around in circles, so it's not very helpful.

Thomas was poisoned today. And sure, he'd seemed to shrug it off with startling aplomb, but that didn't change the facts. He'd been poisoned... by baked goods of all things! If it wasn't for Arnold's potion, he might very well have died! Or would he have? The elderly Apothecary had been quite clear... Thomas shouldn't have survived long enough to make it to Arnold's Hut in the first place. And yet he had...

Never mind that though, far more important was just who had poisoned Thomas in the first place! Sure, he had said it was a courier from the Capital... but that didn't mean much. After all, Eloise was confident that someone as resourceful as the Dark Elf breathing down her neck could easily fake a package delivered from the Capital if she wanted to.

Yes, that was what had Eloise pacing right now. Because... what if Shadow had something to do with it? What if Shadow was the culprit behind Thomas' poisoning? These past four weeks had been some of the most nerve-wracking and hopeful of Eloise's life if she were being honest. Shadow had sped up her visits from once every few months to once every week. She'd done so to both demand a fresh report from Eloise as well as hold up her end of the bargain by healing Eloise's father a bit more.

So on the one hand, once a week Eloise was getting to see her father improve a little bit. Inch by inch, he was coming back from the brink of death. On the other hand, once a week Eloise found herself forced to betray Lord Thomas' trust,

exposing everything he'd done that week to Shadow and confessing his comings and goings in order to earn more treatment for her father.

She couldn't let her father die, not if there was something she could do about it... and yet, time after time Thomas showed himself to be a good, honorable, and kindhearted man undeserving of her treachery. Eloise was stuck in a situation with no good options.

But if Shadow had been the one to poison Thomas today, she would... what? Cancel the deal? Let her father die? Turn her back on her flesh and blood? She...

"Well now, someone looks antsy. Something the matter, dear?"

And there she is, right on cue. Eloise hadn't been pacing in the study for no reason after all... it was just about time for Shadow's weekly visit and at this point it was like clockwork.

Instantly, she advances on Shadow, gritting her teeth and clenching her hands into fists at her sides.

"Say you didn't do it! Say you had no part in it!"

Red eyes narrow as the Dark Elf stands her ground. In fact, she barely even shifts her footing as Eloise gets up in her face. Not that the mousy brunette was expecting her to. She knows exactly how threatening she is... that is to say, not at all. Still, she doesn't back down. Scowl affixed on her face, she glowers at Shadow until the Dark Elf finally responds.

"Sweetie... if I had done something, you would know it. So why don't you back off and tell me what's got you so worked up, alright?"

Eloise grits her teeth.

"Thomas was poisoned today. Was it you?"

She searches what little of Shadow's face that she can see for a reaction... but unfortunately, all she gets is a slow blink from the Dark Elf and a curious noise in the back of her throat.

"Poisoned, you say? The Lordling? How fascinating... what sort of enemies would a whelp like that have, I wonder."

Eloise bristles some more.

"You, for one."

But that just draws a scoff from the Dark Elf.

"Bearing your claws and all is very cute, but go ahead and sheathe them now, darling. I'm not your Lordling's enemy any more than I'm yours. If I was, you both would already be dead. I'm simply an interested party. As for this poisoning... no, I didn't have anything to do with it. If I did want to poison the little lord, again... I wouldn't have botched it. He would have died. Unless he did die... but you don't seem nearly distraught enough for that."

Eloise growls... but she thinks she hears the truth in Shadow's words. And more than that, the Dark Elf is right... she's not a threat of any kind. More 'cute' than 'dangerous'. Huffing, she pulls back, crossing her arms over her chest and turning away.

"No... he lived. He's fine, in fact. The poison... it didn't take."

Shadow's hands come down upon Eloise's shoulders a moment later, making her stiffen up at the contact as the Dark Elf positively purrs into her ear.

"Oh? Tell me more."

... Shit. Maybe she shouldn't have said anything at all because now she's going to have to tell the bitch all about Thomas' inexplicable survival and recovery. Maybe she can hide some of the details... but Shadow seems to be able to

detect when she's trying to lie and Eloise has to earn her father's next treatment. She just has to...

With a shuddering breath, Eloise begins to explain the day's events, feeling like scum all the while. At least... at least she's pretty confident that Shadow had nothing to do with the poisoning and therefore Eloise had in no way contributed to what happened to Thomas today.

That did beg the question though... who the fuck wanted Lord Thomas Marlow dead?

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Sitting on the edge of her bed in her room, Camilla's lips are pressed into a thin line as she stares down at the tome held tightly in her hands. Today had been... a fucking disaster, to say the least. And she couldn't help but feel like it was all her fault.

It'd been two months now since she and the Young Lord had arrived in Last Hope. Two months of being baffled by the way Thomas Marlow comported himself. From his words to his every action, he did not fit the mold that Camilla had believed him to fit. It was like he had become a completely different person from the disgraced second son of House Marlow who had been known to people back in the Capital.

Throughout these past two months, Camilla had done her duty and then some. She had defended the innocents of Last Hope from the monsters of the Darkwoods and assisted the Young Lord in multiple expeditions to gather ingredients for the Apothecary so he could make life-saving potions for the town.

And... she had trained Thomas in fighting, watching him go from a pure novice with the spear, a man who had clearly never held a weapon in his life... to something else entirely. His progress was, quite frankly, a little frightening and a bit disturbing. However, she had no reason to deny him as far as she could see. His requests for them to train together were perfectly fine and he hadn't used a single ounce of what she'd taught him to hurt or threaten anyone.

And yet... and yet, Camilla's oath was not to Lord Thomas. Her oath was to House Marlow and its current Ruling Lord and Lady. In that regard, things were quite clear. She answered to Thomas Marlow on only a surface level, while her overarching orders continued to come from Lord and Lady Marlow.

Which is why she felt like this was all her fault, because part of those orders involved sending weekly status reports back to the Capital via use of the magical tome in her hands. The tome was one way of course, connected to a Master Tome on a pedestal in Lord Marlow's study. It allowed a Noble Lord such as the Head of House Marlow to receive constant reports from house agents all across the Kingdom, to ensure that House Marlow's holdings were being upkeep and its interests were being maintained.

Regardless of Lady Marlow's final orders to her or Thomas Marlow's strange change in personality, Dame Camilla had nevertheless followed her orders and dutifully reported what was happening at Last Hope every single week, writing down the events in the tome she was currently holding and sending the reports on to Lord Marlow for his perusal.

And now... two months in... someone from the Capital had just tried to poison Thomas Marlow. And Camilla couldn't help but think that it was the young man's own mother who'd attempted to do the deed.

Her words still ring in Camilla's mind, after all.

"With any luck, he will eventually take care of himself, perhaps by trying to escape into the Rotlands or the Darkwoods. However, if he does not... then I am not adverse to you hurrying things along."

Camilla did not think that Lady Marlow was an evil or black-hearted woman, to be clear. In fact, she was confident that the Lady's orders had been that of a grieving mother mourning the loss of her eldest son. Martin Marlow wasn't dead when Camilla and Thomas left the Capital, but there were rumors that he would never wake back up...

And yet... and yet, Camilla can't help but wonder. What if Lady Marlow got access to the Master Tome in her husband's study? What if she saw the reports Camilla was sending in? And what if she had decided to take matters into her own hands and send poisoned cookies in some twisted attempt at justice for her eldest son?

After all...

"Wait a few months at least... three should be enough. If he hasn't dealt with himself by then... you have my permission to ensure your safe return to us."

The noblewoman had made it abundantly clear that she didn't expect Thomas to last longer than three months out here. And it had already been two. If she had read Camilla's reports to Lord Marlow, then she very well might have decided that the Young Lord was doing too well for himself... that he was thriving in this environment counter to all of her expectations and that was unacceptable.

Or, worse still, though Camilla hardly wanted to even think about it... it was possible both Lord and Lady Marlow were in agreement that their second son should not ever return from Last Hope. And that he should be dealt with sooner rather than later.

Obviously, Camilla didn't want to believe that was the case. Frankly, she didn't want to believe that any member of the honorable House Marlow would stoop so low as to try and poison one of its sons. However, she also knew just how much grief and heartbreak could turn a man or woman of honor into someone willing to do anything for revenge...

Which brought Camilla to her current conundrum... what in the world was she supposed to report? If she said what happened and told them Thomas still lived and they were behind it, they might make another attempt on his life. Camilla... Camilla wasn't sure she could simply stand aside in the event that that happened. Not with a clear conscience.

And yet, if she says nothing and they were behind it... then they would grow suspicious of her. They would begin to question her loyalties. Which were, of course, still to House Marlow above all else. Right?

She could... she could tell them that Thomas was dead. The only problem with doing that is she would almost certainly be expected to return to the Capital sooner rather than later. That was the whole purpose of her and Lady Marlow's conversation before they'd departed, after all.

"A safe return that can only be facilitated if your current assignment comes to a decisive end. Am I understood?"

As soon as they thought Lord Thomas to be dead, Camilla's assignment in Last Hope would be over. And maybe... maybe she wanted that. Maybe she wanted to return to the Capital, to the seat of House Marlow where she could serve and be put to work using her skills in more exciting and useful ways.

... But something holds her back. She can't exactly explain it either. Something gives her pause. She... she doesn't want to return to the Capital just yet. Not like this anyways. Not without getting to the bottom of the mystery that Thomas Marlow has become for her.

How was he gaining so much skill so quickly? How had he survived a poison that the Apothecary said should have killed him? He was a son of House Marlow so his Gift should have been the Gift of Leadership, but that didn't make sense with how fast he was improving and how strong he was becoming.

Something was up... and Camilla wanted to get to the bottom of it. But if she wanted to stick around, she had to send some sort of message back to the Capital.

Finally opening the tome, Camilla grimaces as she writes down as short of a report as possible. Something that might just get her in trouble down the road... a compromise that perhaps nobody, least of all herself, will be happy with.

The Young Lord was poisoned today. Last Hope's Apothecary was able to save him.

Two short sentences. No more, no less. For the first time, Camilla is glad that the tome is only one way, because it means that they can't use it to demand that she elaborate. If they want to do that, they'll have to send another courier to Last Hope... and Camilla holds out hope that they might not bother.

Though... she also knows it's unlikely that things will work out in her favor long term. The more time passes, the more Lady Marlow will expect Camilla to 'take care' of things here in Last Hope. And Camilla... Camilla isn't sure she can bring herself to do that. So something will have to give eventually. She's just not sure what.

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A/N: Hmm, is Camilla right? Was it House Marlow who tried to poison Thomas? Guess we'll have to wait and see!

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!