

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

**A/N: Departing Last Hope at long last.**

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In spite of what Thomas felt was fairly decisive decision making... they can't leave immediately or anything like that. Rushing off to the Capital the very next day might have let them get ahead of things a bit better but it simply wasn't in the cards. There was too much left to do in Last Hope, too many loose ends to tie up and goodbyes to say and all of that.

For instance, on top of still holding regular training sessions for the villagers of Last Hope that had wanted to continue honing their fighting skills, Thomas had also taken to helping teach a few of the Giftless Children alchemy in recent weeks.

By acting as the go-between for Apothecary Arnold and those children without Gifts who were interested in potion making, the hope had been that they might just be able to get Arnold someone to inherit his duties after all, even if they weren't ever going to be the man's direct apprentice.

That goal fortunately bore fruit mere days before Thomas and company were set to depart, with a young man named Axel developing the Gift of Alchemy quite suddenly one day while he and Thomas were brewing a Purging Potion together.

It was a weight off of Thomas' shoulders that he honestly hadn't known was there... the final Big Thing that was imperiling Last Hope's future. Everything else, the town was doing better than ever before, especially when it came to things like being able to defend themselves or hunting in the much calmer Darkwoods.

But the potions... if Thomas left and Arnold died, then the potions that could hold back Rot Lung would once again run out after a certain point. And then

Eloise's father would probably get sick all over again because he insisted on maintaining the lanterns that held the Rotlands at bay.

Now though, with Axel all set to eventually replace Arnold, the younger man having all of Thomas' alchemy tips and tricks written down in a journal, things were looking up. The next generation of Last Hope was secured.

And so, a week after Sol Godman's fateful arrival and death, Thomas leaves Last Hope behind, accompanied by Camilla, Eloise, and Sevinarya. They ride out of Last Hope in a mere wagon pulled by an extra horse that one of the farms was willing to donate to their cause.

Truth be told, the amount of things that they'd been gifted along with all the warm wishes they'd received in the final days before they departed... it was truly heartwarming. Thomas might not have been in Last Hope for more than half a year, but he'd made an impact all the same.

Sitting in the back of the wagon with Eloise and Sevinarya while Camilla 'drives' up front, Thomas watches Last Hope disappear into the distance as they begin making their way down the road out of town. The glowing blue lanterns that lined the edge of the town's border as well as the road itself are soon replaced with glowing white lanterns, which Thomas has been told represent the rest of the Kingdom's method for holding back the Rotlands.

It's interesting to think that Last Hope turned to utilizing methods from the Darkwoods to keep themselves safe after the Kingdom all but abandoned them to their fate. It worked out in the end... but it left Thomas wondering just how bad things were in the Capital, that they couldn't even be bothered to defend their borders from such things.

At the same time, he can't help eyeing Sevi. The Dark Elf has removed her armor and tucked it away for the time being and has taken to wearing the same servant's uniform that Eloise currently has on.

That was one of the other things that had kept them from leaving town for a day or two more... if they were going to protect Eloise under the guise of her just

being his servant, as well as pass Sevvī off as ‘just an exotic maid’, then the two of them would need to look the part.

And so those with the Gift of Tailoring back in Last Hope had spent day and night crafting the uniforms that the two women wore now, guided by Camilla’s vague recollections of what House Marlow servants would wear.

They weren’t quite the maid outfits that Thomas remembered from back on Earth, but they also weren’t far off. Fortunately, they were modest and covered up everything, so at least it wasn’t fetish material. Even if Thomas did privately have to admit to himself that both Eloise and Sevvī filled out their uniforms in... interesting yet different ways from one another.

Shaking his head in an effort to turn his thoughts away from such things, Thomas lets out a sigh and leans back against the side of the wagon. Of course, this instantly prompts concern from Eloise.

“Lord Thomas? Are you alright?”

He hesitates for a moment... but Last Hope is behind them and he has no clue what lies before them. Camilla had started telling him everything she knew and thought he needed to know about the Capital a week ago, but even now none of it really felt real. He had a feeling it would continue to not feel real right up until he laid eyes on the place for himself.

That said... it’s time to be honest with them all, he feels.

“I have something to confess to the three of you. Something that you should know before we reach the Capital.”

His grave tone prompts a straightened back from Eloise, an arched brow from Sevvī, and a head turn from Camilla. The red head turns herself back to face the road after a moment but also calls back to him.

“You should not feel obligated to tell us all of your secrets, my lord. We are your loyal servants, no matter what.”

Thomas wants to correct her on that. Camilla and Seevi are his loyal servants. Eloise is just playing the role of one. Except the mousy brunette is the one nodding along with Camilla in vehement agreement while the Dark Elf is shooting a narrowed eyed look at the back of the female knight's head, clearly displeased at the thought that Thomas might heed Camilla's words.

Chuckling softly, Thomas just shakes his head in the end.

"No. You need to know. If you're going to be following me, if you're going to be serving me... you deserve to know the truth. I am not the original Lord Thomas Marlow."

That last sentence lands like a lead weight between all of them. Camilla doesn't do anything as dramatic as driving them off the road or anything, but she does tense up for a moment before bringing the horse pulling their wagon to a halt so they come to a complete stop.

Then, she turns to quietly regard him as the others do the same, all three women staring at him expectantly. Thomas grimaces but continues his explanation.

"As Camilla already knows, six months ago I woke up in the carriage with her on the way to Last Hope with no memories of what had occurred previously. However, that's not the full story. I was not truly suffering from amnesia... rather, I had gone to sleep in another world entirely and suddenly woke up in Thomas Marlow's body. It wasn't so much that I had forgotten everything prior to that moment, but rather that I was never in this world to begin with for all those events that led to the original Thomas' exile."

It sounds ridiculous when he says it out loud like this. Eloise's face is scrunched up in confusion and it's clear she's struggling to follow along. Camilla, meanwhile, has an incredulous look and is clearly struggling not to call him mad or a liar.

But Seevi... Seevi crosses her arms over her chest and smirks.

“Sounds about right.”

The two human women in the cart both whip around to stare at the Dark Elf in surprise. Admittedly, Thomas feels just as flabbergasted by Sevi’s casual, accepting attitude. Was this just her trying to look cool again? He’d realized by now that she liked to act dark and mysterious wherever she could.

Frowning, Thomas stares at the Dark Elf.

“Does it? Because let me be clear, I have absolutely no idea what happened to me. Even now, six months later, I have no clue how I ended up in this world.”

Sevi shrugs.

“From what I know, it’s completely random so that makes sense too.”

Okay... Thomas growls.

“Explain, please.”

Perhaps sensing that he’s reaching the limits of his patience, Sevi bobs her head and begins to do exactly that. Apparently, it’s not uncommon among her people for some to be ‘reborn’ after a first death. Namely, by having a drifting soul attach themselves to them, resurrecting the body and giving it a second chance at life after the first soul has already moved on.

“It’s a common enough phenomenon that its been studied by my people. Otherworlders are usually very ‘hit and miss’ in our experience. Either they re-die quickly again because they can’t adapt... or they go on to become legends. Of course, given Dark Elf lifespans, those who go on to become legends inevitably live for hundreds if not thousands of years, and eventually they tell *someone* about their first lives, hence why we know it’s a thing.”

Thomas furrows his brow, slowly nodding as he takes this in. Then, he glances to Camilla.

“Have you not ever heard about this sort of thing though?”

When Camilla just shakes her head mutely in response, Sevi jumps in again.

“That makes sense, doesn’t it? Humans are short lived. You lot probably end up taking this secret to your grave a lot more. Honestly, I’m surprised you’re telling us now... you must have thought you would sound crazy confessing this sort of thing.”

... Sevi was right about that, as much as it pained him to admit it. And maybe she was right about the other part too. Though still, Thomas suspected that someone in the Capital would probably know about this sort of thing. Humans might have shorter life spans, but they weren’t so oblivious that no one would ever notice this phenomenon.

At least if it really was as commonly uncommon as Sevi was making it sound... no, better to be safe than sorry and assume someone where they were going would probably be able to tell what was off about him. He didn’t want to be blindsided by anyone who recognized him as an ‘Otherworlder’, after all.

“This... ultimately changes nothing. You are still the man I swore myself to.”

Camilla’s words prompt a sharp nod of agreement from Sevinarya and an eager nod from Eloise. Which Thomas found quite fair. It wasn’t like he’d shown up halfway through his time with the three of them. Yes he wasn’t the original Lord Thomas Marlow, but he was still the only Thomas Marlow they’d ever really truly known, Camilla included.

They still deserved to know before they walked into an almost certain trap with him though. And also...

“There’s something else as well. I don’t have the Gift of Leadership either.”

There’s less of a reaction this time. The surprise is much more muted... and if Thomas didn’t know any better, he’d say that the three women are more

surprised he told them then they are what he told them. Thomas narrows his eyes at their general lack of reaction, prompting Camilla to cough into her fist.

“I... had my suspicions Lord Thomas. As did everyone else, I suspect.”

Wait, what? Thomas narrows his eyes, sweeping his gaze from Camilla, to Seevi, to Eloise. The latter two seem to agree with the former.

“If you had your suspicions, why didn’t any of you say something?”

Seevi just shrugs.

“I mean, it was what drew me to you in the first place. Your unnatural growth... I assumed it could only be the work of an interesting Gift. You made me very curious. Still, by the time I could demand answers, I was no longer in a position to demand them since at that point I owed you a life debt.”

Eloise, meanwhile, bites her lower lip.

“I didn’t want to pressure you. You had so much on your plate already... and you’ve done so much for me. It didn’t seem that important compared to the fact that you risked your life for me time and time again...”

And finally, Camilla.

“They’re right. It wasn’t our place to question you, Lord Thomas.”

All this time he’d been wondering when someone would finally ask the question... and all this time none of them was willing even though they’d all realized something was up. Sighing, Thomas runs a hand down his face and shakes his head in disbelief.

He’d been so worried about keeping his secret... but in actuality, he’d done such a shit job at it that the only reason it hadn’t come up sooner was they’d all been *letting* him keep it.

“... Right. Okay. So... is anyone curious what my actual Gift is?”

“YES! Of course we are! I mean, I know I am! Tell me! What in the world allowed you to become so strong in just six months?!”

Thomas can't help but grin as Sevvu immediately explodes, leaning forward and staring at him hungrily. Hah, and Camilla and Eloise aren't much better, the two of them leaning towards him at least a little bit as well.

He considers telling them everything for a moment... but in the end, he downplays it still. Not because he doesn't trust them, but because even the full breadth of things sounds ridiculous to him. Instead, he settles for the simpler...

“Potential.”

That gets him a set of blinks, prompting Thomas to just shrug.

“That's what my Gift is. The Gift of Potential. Basically, whatever I put my mind too... I can learn it, enhance it, and grow it. That's what I've been doing these past six months. Training, learning, improving.”

Silence answers him as they all process that. Camilla mouths the word 'Potential' to herself, brow furrowed, while Eloise just looks amazed and Sevvu... Sevvu scowls and crosses her arms over her chest.

“That's ridiculous. What kind of Gift is that, exactly? You're just... good at everything.”

Thomas shrugs again, holding his tongue. Technically he's great at everything... in fact, thanks to his Gift of Relentless Potential, he's not stuck as being just a Jack of All Trades, Master of None. No, eventually he can become a Master of All Trades full stop. He just has to keep striving.

He holds his tongue on that though and instead points out something else.

“I’m pretty sure it even applies to teaching. That’s why those folks who took up arms back in Last Hope became as good as they did so quickly.”

Camilla straightens up, her eyes widening as she realizes she benefited from the same thing. Thomas had noticed too... he’d surpassed Camilla, but he also helped her improve now as a result. Whenever they fought, she got better along with him.

There’s no... easy resolution to this conversation though. It’s a lot of revelations at once, to be sure. And of course, all three women have questions for him, questions that Thomas tries to answer to the best of his ability.

Eventually, Camilla has to turn back around and get them back underway again. As they head down the road towards the Capital though, Thomas makes sure she’s still part of the conversation and allowed to ask just as many questions as Sevv and Eloise.

He swears that no matter what happens next... he’s going to do right by the three of them. Last Hope is in the rearview mirror. House Marlow is barely even a priority. As far as Thomas is concerned, everything and everyone that he cares about is on this wagon right here and now.

Thomas won’t let anything happen to them.

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**A/N: Onwards... to the Capital!**

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