

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

A/N: Like a bad hangover...

-x-X-x-

Thomas wakes up slowly, feeling like he's been put through a damn blender. But... he's still alive as far as he can tell. He's survived yet another brush with death and likely been plied with plenty of restorative potions to kick his healing into full gear.

Opening his eyes, he stares up at the ceiling for a moment, his mind going back over everything that had happened in the throne room. Solomon Godman was dead... but so was the King. And Sevv's older sister had all but promised she was bringing a full blown army to wipe them out and plague the rest of the kingdom with Rot.

"Lord Thomas!"

He barely has time to register that he's not alone in the room before Eloise impacts him. The mousy brunette drives the breath from his protesting, rattling lungs as she hugs him fiercely, but Thomas bites back the noise of discomfort that threatens to leave his lips and just returns the embrace.

At the same time, both Sevv and Camilla come into view as well. The Dark Elf looks hesitant, moving to the other side of his bed but not willing to reach out and touch him. Meanwhile, Camilla stands at the foot of his bed, hand on the pommel of her sword and back straight, like she's ready at any moment for a fight.

Which... when your new enemies can teleport through any area with deep enough shadows, it was probably wise to be alert. However, just from the bags under her eyes, Thomas can tell she hasn't gotten much sleep. And a look at Sevv and then Eloise shows they aren't much better off.

“How... how long?”

His voice is parched and raspy as he speaks, letting him know even before they tell him that it's been a bit.

“Two days, my lord.”

Camilla's voice is strained and she looks like she's holding herself together through sheer force of will. As Thomas absorbs the amount of time it had taken him to wake up... he looks from her to Sevv and then Eloise before grunting and raising the arm that's not current wrapped around Eloise's body.

“Come here. Both of you.”

Sevv doesn't need to be told twice. She's immediately halfway onto the bed, curling herself against his side and embracing him as well. Camilla is a bit more hesitant, eventually moving to stand behind Eloise and reach out to place a hand on his shoulder.

Chuckling weakly, Thomas reaches up and grasps at Camilla's arm, giving her a solemn nod. That's what finally breaks her, her stoicism cracking and once it cracks, it shatters. Her face scrunches up into a pained grimace as tears streak down her cheeks and she moves forward, embracing both him and Eloise. Despite her armor, Eloise makes no protest of this, too busy hugging him to notice any discomfort.

It's in the midst of all of this, with Thomas being piled on by all three of the most important women in his life... that the door to the bedroom opens up and the Princess steps in.

There's a bit of scrambling as Camilla immediately straightens up and Sevv jerks back as if burned. Only Eloise remains affixed to him for longer than a moment after Princess Anna's arrival. But even she reluctantly peels herself off of him a few seconds into the ensuing silence, rising to her feet to face the Princess.

Princess Anna observes them all during that time with an indecipherable expression on her face. Finally though, the beautiful blonde looks to him and smiles softly. There's a distinct note of melancholy to her smile, but there's also a genuine warmth there, even as she dips her head at him.

"I'm glad to see you're awake."

Then, she looks to the others.

"Though I know I have no right to ask this... may I have a moment alone with your Master?"

Thomas blinks, raising a brow as his retainers and lovers all share a quiet series of looks with one another. To his surprise, Camilla slowly nods for all of them after a few seconds.

"... Very well. We'll be right outside."

As they all step away and Princess Anna moves forward, Thomas pushes himself up into a sitting position on the bed. He still remembers his embarrassing fainting episode back in the throne room... he doesn't want the Princess to think any less of him. Though even as he thinks that he's forced to acknowledge that she has every right to think less of him all the same.

In fact, as soon as they're alone, Thomas starts things off with what he considers the most important part of this impending conversation.

"I'm sorry."

Princess Anna gives him a strange look.

"You're... sorry? Whatever for?"

Grunting, Thomas winces.

“For your loss... and for the part I played in that whole mess. Things... shouldn’t have gone down like that.”

Taking a chair and moving it to the side of his bed, Anna sits down with her hands folded demurely in her lap.

“You blame yourself.”

It’s not a question but Thomas answers it as one anyways, nodding along in agreement.

“Yes. How can I not? Your father and I... we came up with that whole performance together, along with his Spymaster. We could have handled Solomon Godman much more swiftly... we could have locked him down, had him in shackles, and then explained his crimes to the crowd. He should never have had that chance to summon the elves like he did, but we were too busy making a mockery of him to worry about such things.”

Thomas certainly had been. He couldn’t help but want to beat himself up for it too. He had never even known this body’s parents or his brother, and yet... he’d let himself get caught up in seeking vengeance for the original Thomas Marlow and his family all the same.

Solomon Godman was an enemy who had to be taken care of, that much couldn’t be argued. But making a show of things, focusing on his humiliation over bringing him to justice... that was precisely what had led them to this current situation.

“You’re much too full of yourself.”

Thomas blinks, looking to see Anna staring at him with a strangely blank look on her face.

“You act as if you had any say in how my father would handle Solomon Godman. As if it wasn’t his plan to force Lord Godman to out himself in front of the entire court.”

Thomas grimaces.

“I should have protested the plan though. I should have advised to take a safer approach just in case Lord Godman had any tricks up his sleeves.”

The Princess’ nose scrunches up at that.

“He did not have tricks up his sleeves. His trick was on the necklace under his shirt.”

Right... yeah. Rather than try to explain it, Thomas just inclines his head in acknowledgment of the correction. After a beat, Anna continues.

“Even if you had protested, I doubt my father would have changed his mind or acted any differently than he did. You forget that Solomon Godman didn’t just harm your family... he cut our entire Kingdom in half with the Rotlands. He killed countless noble families and caused many more to become defunct and penniless. And he tried to collar my father with my own suffering and survival.”

The Princess shakes her head.

“His reckoning was always going to be what it needed to be. His humiliation was set in stone the moment he moved against the Royal House of Ashwood. Nothing you could have done or said would have deterred my father from this course of action.”

Well... when she put it that way, Thomas supposed he didn’t have much of an argument. That said...

“There’s still the other part. The reason your father died. Sevi... if she hadn’t been so honest with her sister, then the First Princess might not have ordered everyone dead. It’s obvious she did it to get back at Sevi for killing Graelo. Your father would still be alive right now. And seeing as Sevi is my responsibility... I’m sorry.”

Not that he personally blamed Seevi for what she'd done. Thomas knew full well how much it had affected her, having to order Graelo to kill himself like he had as punishment for accidentally making an attempt on her life. She'd done it to save Thomas. She'd done it to protect the both of them.

Telling Synestra what she'd done had clearly been something Seevi felt like she had to reveal in the moment... and Thomas knew she'd never expected the other Dark Elf's reaction to be what it was. She'd been just as shocked as the rest of them.

"I don't blame you or Seevi for the actions of her sister or the death of my father. All of that I lay solely at the feet of the First Princess and Lord Godman. The latter is dead, righteously slain by your hand... and the former is coming for us. All of us. It makes no sense for me to spend my time raging at you when we have to prepare for her and her army."

Anna's voice is rather... clinical and matter-of-fact as she explains her reasoning. Thomas slowly nods along, taking in her words as he realizes only then that he's not actually looking at the Princess anymore, is he? He's looking at the Queen. Though...

"When is the coronation?"

Anna smiles slightly.

"Tomorrow. I'd like it if you feel up to attending, but I also understand if you cannot."

Tomorrow. Just three days after the death of her father. But then... they're at war now, no matter what Synestra might want to call it. And frankly, Thomas has no idea how long it will take Seevi's sister to move an army from the Darkwoods to this Kingdom.

Obviously Synestra herself and the vast majority of her forces had been nowhere near human lands. Instead, the Dark Elves they'd slain in the throne

room two days ago must have been close by, lying in wait ready to assist Lord Godman whenever he required them.

Otherwise... the Kingdom would already be overrun by now. Just based on how angry she'd been, if Synestra could have invaded by now, she already would have. But that didn't mean she wasn't just around the corner. A week? A month? Who knew how long they had... which meant they needed to start preparing. Immediately.

"I'll be there. I can make my oaths to you right afterwards, if it pleases Your Grace. And then we can get to work."

Anna pauses, and for a second Thomas wonders if she'd forgotten that he had yet to swear to her father, let alone her. Technically, he still wasn't Lord of House Marlow even. They'd been interrupted by Solomon Godman back in the throne room and things had gotten so out of control that Thomas had never gotten the chance to swear properly to the Crown.

Well, he was ready to do so now, even if it would be to Queen Anna Ashwood instead of her father. Only... she looks hesitant for a moment before shaking her head.

"I had something else in mind, actually."

Thomas furrows his brow, prompting the Princess to blush a bit and glance away for a moment.

"... The fact that you swore no oaths to my father or myself presents us with something of an opportunity. You are not technically part of the nobility, as of yet..."

He didn't understand what she was getting at, exactly. Yes, he wasn't part of the nobility yet... but what did that have to do with anything? They needed him to take over the Marlow assets as soon as possible if they wanted to eventually replace House Godman's white lanterns with Last Hope's blue ones to ward off the Rot.

More than that, the edge of House Marlow lands were all up against the Darkwoods. They would need to mobilize there, to build up the defenses in not just Last Hope but all along the border in anticipation of Synestra's army making their attack. He couldn't help her with that if he wasn't Lord Marlow though... could he?

Unless she wanted to use him as some sort of deniable asset, but Thomas had to admit, he just didn't see how that would help at this point in time.

"Normally, when the reigning monarch needs a spouse with which to continue the family line, the marriage is incredibly one-sided. My father was King of course, but my mother was only ever Queen Consort. This was because she was a noblewoman of the Kingdom before she was ever my father's wife, and to make her the Queen in truth would have been giving too much power to her family's House. It would have been elevating their House to the same status as the Royal House of Ashwood."

Thomas stares, not really understanding what Anna is talking about. Maybe it's the injuries, maybe it's the forty-eight hour coma he just woke up from. But he's really struggling to process what she's saying. And even once he does wrap his head around her words, he doesn't fully comprehend what any of it has to do with *him*.

"However... House Marlow stands at one man now, Thomas. You. And you are not sworn to me... not yet. This presents me with a singular opportunity to have more than just a husband, more than just a King Consort... if we were to marry, you would become King in truth. My equal partner in all things."

Even with her spelling it out directly for him like that, Thomas is still playing catch up, his eyes slowly blinking as his brain works overtime to try and understand what she's saying. She's talking about a husband... about HIM being her husband. She's talking about him being *King*.

"I believed my father when he said he loved my mother very much, but that doesn't change the fact that she was always subordinate to him. That's not what

I want in my own marriage. That's not what I want in a man who I'm going to spend the rest of my life with. That's why... I wished to ask if you would marry me, Thomas Marlow. Let us join our houses together into a new Royal House of Ashwood-Marlow."

Well. Fuck.

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A/N: Yes Thomas, 'fuck' is right. Fuck is exactly what Anna wants from you. Along with all of the other stuff, huehuehue.

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!