

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

A/N: What's going on here, exactly?

-x-X-x-

As the King's words hang in the air, the tension is palpable. Thomas wants to intervene, but he's not sure what will happen if he does. In the end, after a long drawn out moment, Sevvī steps forward, gives a short perfunctory bow, and then straightens up and speaks.

“Apologies. But the only orders I obey are from my Master.”

Well... as far as responses go, it could have been worse? Thomas nevertheless finds himself wincing... and tensing up when he feels the same guardsman from before shifting in agitation behind them. But before anything can happen, the King does something unexpected... he chuckles.

Thomas blinks as the monarch lets out a raspy sort of laugh, shaking his head all the while.

“I suppose I can't fault you for speaking the truth when that's what I demanded, hm?”

King Ashwood turns his gaze back to Thomas, staring at him assessingly for a brief second.

“... I wonder, how did you come across this one in the first place, Thomas Marlow? How did you earn such loyalty from her?”

Thomas shoots a glance to Sevvī, but ultimately he sees no reason to hide at least the general idea of what had occurred.

“I saved her life and helped her settle accounts with the thing that tried to end it, Your Majesty. In return, she swore a life debt to me and my family... in perpetuity.”

The King’s brow raises higher upon his forehead at that and he looks mighty impressed for a moment. Finally, he nods.

“I see. Another mark in your favor, from the sound of things. You continue to surprise.”

Seeing an opportunity to ask the most burning question on his mind, Thomas glances to the young woman in the bed.

“How did this happen, Your Majesty? I was under the impression that Rot Lung was very treatable so long as it was caught early. I haven’t seen anyone else in the Capital who seems to be suffering from its effects since my arrival either.”

To be fair, he’d only been in the Capital for a day and a half at this point. Even still, for what he suspected was a Princess or at least the relative of the King to be laid up in bed like this... for her to have Rot Lung, then he would expect it to be a pandemic. For a member of the Royal Family to have contracted the magical disease but nobody else... didn’t make much sense.

The King’s eyes turn back towards the bed, his gaze softening and turning morose as he looks upon the woman.

“... My daughter was targeted, for all that I am expected to pretend she was not. She is no victim of happenstance or circumstance... she is a victim of ambition and folly... both they’re and mine.”

Thomas blinks, not fully understanding what’s being said here. To his surprise, the King’s gaze flickers past him and Sevv, to the guards in the room.

“Leave us.”

“Your Majesty?!”

“You heard me. They are unarmed, are they not? Step outside so that we may have privacy.”

The guardsmen both hesitate... but in the end, they do as they're told, leaving Thomas and Sevi alone with the King and his bedridden daughter. Thomas doesn't comment on just how armed Sevi still is... it's not like he's about to have her try and commit regicide or anything like that. Honestly, his curiosity is piqued at this point... he wants to know what's going on here.

The King, once the guards are gone, sits back down in the chair by his daughter's beside with a heavy sigh. Then, he takes the Princess' hand in his again, intertwining their fingers together.

“Anna has always been a kind, gentle soul. My enemies would have me believe that this was her own doing, that her charity work with the poorer denizens of the city who have become afflicted with Rot Lung is what caused her to contract the magical disease even though I know that is not how it works. Besides, Anna was never so foolish as to not take all proper precautions. No, she is no victim of her own selflessness... rather, she is a victim of the same foul villains that your family has fallen prey to.”

Thomas' eyes widen at the admission. House Godman was behind this?! They had given the King's daughter Rot Lung? How the fuck had they not been killed to the last by this point?!

“I have no proof, of course. They've infiltrated my Palace and are among my Royal Investigators, as I'm sure you know by this point. No evidence of their involvement in Anna's affliction has been uncovered so far.”

On the one hand, Thomas is relieved. From the sound of things, it didn't go all the way to the top like he'd feared. House Godman had friends in the Palace and clearly had agents in the Royal Investigators, but the King definitely didn't seem them as allies. On the other hand, Thomas can't help but be frustrated.

“You’re the King, aren’t you? Even if you don’t have proof, if you’re so certain... shouldn’t you do something?”

This man was supposed to be the highest power in the land... and yet, he had let House Godman have free reign. Enough so that the Marlow Estate had been torched and his parents and brother apparently killed. For all that Thomas had no emotional connection to them, he was still aggrieved.

“And if I did... then the treatments would stop. And my daughter would die.”

Thomas’ eyes widen at that admission. There was no way...

“What treatments, Your Majesty?”

Looking away from his sleeping daughter, the King turns and levels a stare at him.

“Anna’s illness came on rapidly and suddenly, far faster than Rot Lung should normally act. She was fine one day in spite of her extracurricular activities... and bedridden the next. By the third day she was sleeping, her entire body shutting down and wasting away so quickly that she looked like she would be dead by the end of the week.”

That... yeah, that sounded way worse than the Rot Lung that Mayor Harper had suffered from. He’d been bedridden for months before Thomas had come along and to hear Eloise tell it, it had taken years of no treatment for the older man to properly begin to succumb to the magical disease.

He could see why the King would think that this was enemy action, all things considered. This sounded like some form of Super Rot Lung or something... the kind of thing that was manufactured, rather than happening naturally.

“In my desperation, afraid that I would lose my daughter too fast for me to do anything, I sent out a call for help to anyone and everyone. And someone answered... from House Godman. A specialist healer, they said. Someone who could do the impossible and provide treatment for Rot Lung.”

Thomas begins to put the dots together at that, sneaking a glance over to Sevi who looks rather ambivalent to everything they're being told. She won't be ambivalent for long though, not if this story is going where Thomas thinks it's going.

"House Godman's Specialist was able to help Anna where nobody else could. His treatment worked... she stopped worsening and wound up in this state you see before you now. Alive... but far from whole. And yet... I am a father, Thomas Marlow. I would rather have my daughter in this state... then not have her at all."

Grimacing, Thomas decides to cut to the heart of the matter.

"You didn't want to see me today at all, did you Your Majesty? You wanted to see Sevi here. Why exactly? What made you ask if she knew how to treat Rot Lung?"

The King's lips lift up again in a slight smirk, albeit one that doesn't reach his tired, flinty eyes.

"They did the best they could to conceal the identity of their specialist from me. Any time he's in the Palace, he wears concealing robes and a mask that entirely hides his features. However, I am the King. I am not without my resources or men I can rely on. Said men were eventually able to uncover this specialist's true nature... he is a Dark Elf, the same as your servant here. It stood to reason then, that treating Rot Lung might just be common knowledge among their people. Certainly worth checking, if nothing else."

"Impossible."

Sevi cuts in before Thomas can, her eyes narrowed and her lips pursed. Rather than take offense at her incredulity, King Ashwood just arches a brow in response, prompting her to elaborate.

"A Dark Elf Male would not be this far from the Darkwoods, let alone the Capital. It wouldn't be allowed. Whatever your men think they saw... it's not that."

She sounds absolutely certain of that too. From what little Thomas knows, Sevvi's society is intensely matriarchal. The men are treated little better than livestock. So she might be right about finding a Dark Elf Male this far from home being truly ridiculous. Then again, maybe he'd simply run away like she had. Or the far worse scenario... he was here on someone else's orders.

"I am not interested in arguing the point with you. His treatments are beyond what even my greatest human healers can come up to. Furthermore, I trust the men who uncovered his true nature implicitly. Beyond that, the circumstances that led to him being in House Godman's employ are meaningless to me."

The King's clipped tone makes it clear his patience is starting to finally run a little bit thin. He continues on, his voice strong and clear.

"What matters to me is my daughter. So long as I am forced to rely on House Godman's Specialist, so long as Anna's life is in their hands, I must turn a blind eye to the worst of their excesses. They cannot act with total impunity, they must keep at least some of their terrible actions hidden and cloaked behind a thin veneer of civility and respectability for now... but things are only getting worse, as you can personally attest."

That last part is directed at Thomas, of course. Moving his eyes back and forth between them, the monarch leans back in his chair, appearing as regal as a man sitting at his dying daughter's bedside possibly can.

"If you cannot help me with this... then I fear I will not be able to help you either. I imagine you wish to be recognized as Lord of House Marlow. I imagine you wish to seek revenge against House Godman for what they've done to you. So tell me, Thomas Marlow... can your servant help my daughter? Can you free me from the shackles House Godman has placed on me?"

... There's something deeply ironic about leaving behind Last Hope only to find more of the same in the Capital, just writ large. The more things changed, the more they stayed the same, eh?

And yet... the King was effectively handing Thomas everything he possibly could have wanted, wasn't he? Because... hopefully yes, Sevvī would be able to provide a cure for even this form of Rot Lung. It might take longer, maybe multiple sessions in fact... but it could probably be done.

Of course, the smart thing to do would be to replace House Godman's hold over the King... with his own. Having Sevvī treat Anna's disease in small doses just like she'd done for Mayor Harper and just like this mysterious Dark Elf Male had been doing for the Princess... well, it would provide Thomas with quite a lot of leverage over the King, wouldn't it?

More than that, it was all the King was expecting too. It was all he dared to hope for. He had no idea that Dark Elves knew how to fully cure Rot Lung, he thought they could only treat it. That was all he was banking on here...

... But if Thomas held the life of the King's daughter over the other man's head, that would just make him a monster on par with the likes of Sol Godman and his father. It would make him exactly the sort of bastard that everyone had believed the original Thomas Marlow to be.

In the end... Thomas lets out a breath and nods his head.

"Yes. I believe we can help. Sevvī, can you check on the Princess and tell me what you think, please?"

The King straightens up, naked hope shining on his face now. Sevvī, meanwhile, simply inclines her head in wordless acknowledgment of the order and moves forward. Approaching the bedridden young woman from the other side of the bed, she looks her over quietly for a long moment, before bringing her hand up. A familiar glow spreads across it and then into Anna.

Both Thomas and the King watch on with bated breath. As time goes on though, the King's brow begins to furrow.

"... It doesn't usually take this long."

Thomas can't help but smile a little bit at that, taking the opportunity to carefully approach the end of the bed.

"She's not just treating the Rot Lung, Your Majesty. She's curing it."

Before the King can do more than jerk in shock, Sevvī lets out a grunt.

"Trying to, anyways. This is definitely a far more virulent strain. Its resisting me..."

Thomas' smile drops and he frowns as Sevvī works. Silence falls again for a time... until finally, Sevvī pulls back with a gasp, looking like she's just run several circuits around the entire city as she has to brace herself with a hand on the bed.

Meanwhile, the Princess looks... noticeably improved. She's still unconscious, still asleep, still bedridden... but she looks far more alive at least. She's not quite as gaunt anymore for one, and even her breathing seems to have improved from what Thomas can see. Frankly, she's quite beautiful, even asleep like this.

"It will take multiple sessions. I do not have the strength to cure her in one go."

Sevvī sounds upset about this... probably because she was hoping to impress him and earn his praise. Moving to her side, Thomas offers her his support, letting her cling to him. He also brings a hand down atop her head, patting it in a way that makes her long dark ears freeze.

"You did well, Sevvī. You did very well."

Sevvī visibly perks up at that, looking at him with a distinctly satisfied expression on her face now that he's given his approval. Meanwhile...

"Indeed you did."

King Ashwood cuts in, reminding Thomas and Sevvie that they aren't alone. Turning to regard the monarch, Thomas sees the man studying his daughter's face for a moment longer before turning his eyes upon them.

"A cure... I never could have imagined such a thing would be possible. But with this... with this, House Godman can be brought to heel... and to justice. For that last part however, I will require further aid from you, Thomas Marlow."

Heh. Of course it could never be simple.

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A/N: The plot THICKENS!

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!