

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

A/N: Seevi gets no respect around here!

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“... What was that? Seevi, back there... what was that?”

Seevi twitches as Gruda speaks up the second they arrive back at the hideout. Honestly, she'd known it was a bad idea letting Gruda tag along from the very beginning. But at least the other Dark Elf had waited until they were back in relative private before commenting.

Turning to her second in command, Seevi narrows her eyes.

“What was what?”

Of course, playing dumb just makes Gruda scowl in response, the other Dark Elf yanking off her mask to show her agitation in full.

“Don't give me that! You can't just pretend like nothing happened, Seevi. You're missing a dagger!”

In an instant, her remaining dagger is in her hand and Seevi has Gruda pressed up against the wall of the tunnel, placing the curved blade against the other Dark Elf's neck. Gruda freezes up, not even daring to breathe as Seevi narrows her eyes to slits.

“I'm not missing anything, Gruda. I spent that blade precisely how I intended to... and put it directly into the hands I intended to put it.”

Gruda grimaces, careful to keep her neck as far back as she possibly can.

“But... why? The human was losing. He wasn't strong enough to slay the King of the Forest on his own. So... why did you help him?”

Spirits, she was surrounded by short-sighted fools, wasn't she? Sevvī scoffs, shaking her head.

“It was never about him being strong enough to kill the King on his own, Gruda. It was about testing his limits and seeing what he would do when driven past the edge of them.”

Gruda's face scrunches up in confusion.

“I... I don't understand. He was *losing*. Doesn't that mean he failed the test?”

This was the problem with her people's society. This was why Sevvī had run away from home. There was no room for failure. Second chances were incredibly rare and third chances were unheard of. If you failed even once you were often deemed worthless and tossed aside. If you didn't die, you became nothing more than trash, the bottom rung of society. More often, you just died.

But if Sevvī had let the Thomas Marlow die today, it would have been a true tragedy. Because seeing him fight... she knew she was right at this point. He was special. Where anyone else would have given up and died, he kept going. Where anyone else would have ran away and left the other humans behind, he'd charged forward, his minder knight at his side.

And where anyone else would have faltered and fallen prey to the King of the Forest, the Lordling had continued fighting long after it became clear that the battle was hopeless.

At the end there, Thomas had even found a way to make it a draw. She'd seen what he was going to do... one final move that would have almost certainly resulted in his death as well as the King's. If she'd let it happen, he would have died... but he also would have succeeded, because it was highly likely that the rest of the Dire Wolves following the King of the Forest would have stuck around and continued to threaten Last Hope without their leader.

But letting him die... would have been a waste. And Sevvī was not in the habit of wasting anyone or anything. Gruda was just too short-sighted to see that. With each passing day, it became more and more obvious to Sevvī that her second wanted to go home.

For a split second, she wonders how many of the others are growing tired of this excursion. For Sevvī it was a true escape, but if even her mother saw it as a flight of fancy, how many of her supposed comrades thought it was just a vacation as well? How many of them were waiting for Sevvī to call for an end to all of it so they could pack it in and go home?

Snarling at the thought, Sevvī yanks her blade back from Gruda's neck, releasing the other Dark Elf and turning to stomp off down the tunnel. Gruda doesn't know when to stop pushing her luck though and calls out after her.

"Your mother will want to know how it went..."

Stopping in her tracks, Sevvī pauses briefly before clicking her tongue.

"I'll tell her myself."

"What? You will?"

"That's right. After all, today was a success. She deserves to hear the good news."

The words are acid on her tongue, but better that Sevvī report in rather than Gruda. She doesn't need her traitorous second in command twisting events around and making her mother think that Sevvī should be recalled home. She really doesn't need that. After all, things with Thomas Marlow were just getting... interesting.

Besides, Gruda really didn't understand the depth of Sevvī's genius. In deliberately and visibly helping the human Lordling kill the King of the Forest, she was setting herself up as a mysterious ally of sorts. Even if the mousy human, Eloise, wanted to betray her and risk her father's healing by telling

Thomas about Sevvī's actions, she would be stymied now once he brought back one of Sevvī's daggers.

It was the perfect move. It kept Eloise's mouth shut while also putting her firmly in the 'tentative ally' category in the Lordling's brain. He had her to thank for his continued breathing after all, and while Sevvī wasn't going to collect on that debt any time soon, she was more than happy to put it in her back pocket and wait a little while...

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"-I was ready to die, really. If it meant finishing off the King of the Forest, I would have gladly given my life. But before I could do so, before our final exchange could take place... that flew through the air and grievously wounded the beast, giving me the opening I needed to finish him off without it costing my own life in the process."

Camilla stares at the foreign, curved blade resting on the table between them. It's her, Eloise, and Thomas all sitting in the kitchen of Eloise's family home as Thomas explains things to them. It's been a full day and a half since the fight with the King of the Forest, most of which Camilla had spent unconscious, healing from her wounds.

If not for the potions that the Young Lord had shoved down Camilla's throat, she wouldn't have healed nearly as fast. Recovery would have been measured in weeks if not months... or hell, she wouldn't be here at all right now, probably.

Indeed, from hearing him tell the story, neither of them should be here right now. The only reason they were... was because an elf had stepped in to help them while she'd lain there, unconscious and bleeding out from her injuries.

"So you see, I can't take all the credit. I'm all for us taking some men into the Darkwoods tomorrow to try and retrieve the King of the Forest's body if it remains, but I won't pretend like I'm some big damn hero who singlehandedly saved the day or anything like that. I wouldn't have lasted half as long if you

hadn't maimed him first Camilla, and I wouldn't be here talking with you both right now if it wasn't for that mysterious elf all in black."

Across the table, Eloise lets out a shuddering breath.

"Y-You said... her ears were black too? She was a Dark Elf?"

Thomas shrugs but also nods.

"Well I can't say if they were female or not, but that's what I think I remember. Admittedly, my brains were pretty scrambled at that point and I had blood in my eyes... but the dagger is real if nothing else, so I know its owner was too."

Eloise flinches and bites her lower lip, prompting Camilla to clear her throat and lean forward.

"Eloise is probably right, it would have been a woman, not a man. Dark Elves are a Matriarchal Society... their men are kept on very short leashes and the likelihood of running into a male Dark Elf this far away from the heart of their power is low. But then, running into one in general is fairly rare... we know OF them, but I've never met someone who had seen one face to face before... until now."

She dips her head in Thomas' direction at the end there, making it clear she believes his words. After all, at this point calling him a liar wouldn't just be uncalled for... it would be the height of stupidity. The proof is right before her eyes in the form of the curved dagger in front of them. She's never heard or seen anything of its like before, but if she had to guess what a Dark Elf's weapon might look like... this would be it.

And of course, there's the fact that the Young Lord is literally going out of his way to give up credit for their victory by passing off some of it to this mysterious elven woman. Given Camilla's own poor showing in battle, he could have just as easily claimed he was victorious purely on his own merits and nobody would have ever known the difference.

Speaking of which... Camilla lets out an explosive breath. She feels like a failure. As much as Lord Thomas kept saying that her one significant blow against the King of the Forest had been what allowed him to then fight the beast one on one... she had still been taken out of the fighting at an unacceptably early moment.

Leaving Thomas to face such a monster alone while she lay there on the forest floor unconscious... she was undeserving of her titles. She was undeserving of her knighthood.

And yet... there was nobody here to strip her of her honors for her failure. Nobody here to bring her to task. Nor would her honor allow her to abandon Thomas so she could return to the Capital and present herself to the Order for flagellation. Indeed, more than ever now, she owed Lord Thomas her service. Perhaps... perhaps it was time to make it official.

“Lord Thomas.”

Camilla’s words cut through the air, making the Young Lord straighten up and look her way curiously. Slowly, she rises from her chair and takes her sword from her belt.

“No matter the circumstances, you saved my life... and the life of every single person in this town. It was through your actions and bravery that we all still breathe today.”

Thomas grimaces a bit.

“That’s... I mean, you’ve saved my life before too, remember? So... I was just returning the favor.”

Camilla gives him a distinctly unimpressed look at that. They both know that those events and these events were decidedly not the same. Thomas grimaces harder, no doubt having the same thought. Huffing and shaking her head a little in amusement, Camilla drops to one knee before him and holds up her sheathed sword, held along her palms.

“From this moment onward, I swear my sword to you, Lord Thomas Marlow. Not as a Knight of your House, but as your Knight. For as long as you will have me, I will stay by your side and follow your commands. I will protect your body, your property, and your loved ones as though they were my own. From this day until my last.”

Her words hang heavy in the air as both Thomas and Eloise stare at her with wide eyes. Camilla though, only has eyes for Thomas. As much as she likes Eloise, it's only his opinion that matters in this moment.

“I... haven't you already sworn similar vows to my family though?”

That... Camilla grimaces and shakes her head.

“I have already broken them by refusing to follow the last orders given to me. Whether they know it or not... I am not theirs any longer. I am yours. If... if you will have me.”

Admittedly, it's a bit of a grey area. And there's certainly an argument to be made that Camilla has already lost her honor somewhere along the way these past few months and has no hope of getting it back. Whether she lost it when she didn't push back against Lady Marlow's original insinuations, or when she'd acted like such a boor and wretch during their early time here in Last Hope... it matters not, in the end.

She knows where she belongs. Lord Thomas has proven himself worthy of her fellowship and respect time and time again at this point. And... more than that, really. He's proven himself worthy of her devotion.

“... Alright then. I won't turn you away Camilla. Maybe if this were all those months ago back when we got off on the mother of all wrong foots, but eh... you've grown on me since then. Like a fungus.”

Camilla's nose wrinkles at the Young Lord's latest strange saying. And then she feels a little offended when he described her as a fungus. And yet... he's smiling

at her and even offering her his hand to help her up. Feeling a strange warmth in her chest that she can't ignore, Camilla takes Thomas' offered hand and lets him pull her to her feet, even as she fights down her blush.

"Thank you, Lord Thomas. I swear, from this moment on... I won't let you down."

Thomas slowly nods.

"I believe you. Though hopefully with the King of the Forest dead, things will calm down a little bit. Shouldn't be any more goblins or Dire Wolf attacks for a while at least, right?"

... They could only hope.

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Later that night, Thomas is lying in bed staring up at the ceiling, toying with the dagger that Dark Elf had 'gifted' him. If she wanted it back, surely she would have retrieved it herself, right? The fact that she left it behind... well, he'd hold onto it for her, just in case she did come back for it.

Still, the King of the Forest was dead. That was good. And the closest goblin tribe to Last Hope was wiped out too. Even better. Maybe he could get back to testing the limits of his Gift without worrying about *really* testing its limits...

There's a sudden knock at the door that has him sitting up and blinking.

"Yes? Come in."

The door opens... and to his surprise, Camilla pads her way into the room. The beautiful red haired knight is out of her armor in one of the handful of times Thomas has ever seen her dressed down... except this time, she's even more so because all she's wearing is a simple shift as she closes the door behind her and makes her way over to his bed.

Thomas' mouth goes dry as Camilla stops a few feet away... and shucks off the shift, revealing her body underneath.

"Lord Thomas..."

Swallowing hard, Thomas lifts up a hand.

"Hold. I... I don't expect you to serve me in this way as my Knight, just so we're clear."

Camilla pauses... and then smiles softly, shaking her head.

"No. That is that... and this is this."

Oh. So that's how it was. Thomas hesitates for a moment longer... before rising to his feet.

"Then for this... you should call me Thomas. No titles."

Slowly, Camilla nods. And then they move towards each other.

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A/N: Next chapter is NSFW, just as a heads up. No fade to black here, just a momentary pause!

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!