

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

A/N: Killin' spiders... but not the right spider v.v

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With a roar, Thomas brings his Magic Steel Halberd down upon the giant spider in front of him before the creature has a chance to truly react. The dying scream it lets out as he cleaves right through the eight-legged arachnid's abdomen is as unearthly as ever. And yet, the shriek barely makes him wince at this point... he's become inured to the sound at this point.

A week into the hunt for the Spider-Queen, Thomas isn't quite as optimistic as he was back at the start of this quest. Probably because he and Camilla have been going practically nonstop ever since. They've cleared a dozen spider nests in half as many days, filling their time with nothing but racing through the Darkwoods and hunting down more and more of the eight-legged creatures.

The only real silver lining is that giant spiders in this world aren't actually all that giant. They're giant when compared to normal spiders of course, but really that just leaves them the size of dogs, not humans or bigger. The biggest giant spiders they've encountered have been the broodmothers, which tend to reach the size of a normal Dire Wolf at their absolute biggest. Still pretty big, but also not the end of the world, especially not for Thomas or Camilla.

Of course, he suspects the Spider-Queen will be much, much bigger. Sevinarya had compared it to the King of the Forest after all. Not quite as powerful, but much more cunning... those were the words she'd used if Thomas was remembering correctly.

He kept expecting them to just... stumble across it truth be told. Even as he and Camilla cut their way through nest after nest, killing spider after spider, slashing away at web after web, he kept expecting for a massive fuck-off spider the size of a carriage to drop down on them from above at any moment.

Especially when they found particularly dense webbing, the type that was so voluminous that it was hard to see the trees amidst all of the white, sticky gunk. Whenever they found a spot like that, Thomas became almost certain that the Spider-Queen was just waiting for them to close in, lurking around the corner or above their heads.

But... nope. Nothing. Just a bunch of normal giant spiders, which admittedly they were doing a pretty good job of clearing out. The only problem was, they were doing too good of a job and starting to run out of anything that was within even a day's travel from Last Hope.

Admittedly, as Thomas had gotten stronger and faster, what qualified as 'within a day's travel' had slowly transformed and expanded outwards. At this point, he and Camilla could easily traverse five times the distance in a day that they could back at the start of their Darkwood Expeditions all those months ago.

That didn't make it any less of a hassle though. They still had to range further and further into the Darkwood each time they left Last Hope. They still had to hunt for spider nests for what felt like hours on end, hoping with each one they found that this was the one where the Spider-Queen made her lair.

As Thomas turns away from the giant spider he's just finished killing, he's just in time to watch Camilla's sword weave through the air and take the head of this particular nest's broodmother off of its body. As the larger giant spider's headless corpse collapses to the ground, flipping over and its legs curling inward in its death throes, Thomas meets Camilla's eyes and huffs.

"... This isn't working."

Camilla tilts her head to the side even as she wipes her sword clean of spider guts and copious amounts of ichor. Thomas does the same with his halberd, the two of them quietly working for a moment before the red headed knight finally responds.

"It's possible that this 'Spider-Queen' doesn't even exist, Lord Thomas. The elf might be leading us around by our nose."

That... Thomas grimaces. It's not like the thought hasn't crossed his mind at least once. There was a reason they were also working on Plan B after all. He just...

"Well now, I think I should be offended."

In an instant, Thomas and Camilla both spin around towards the sound of the voice that has just rung out from behind them. Behind... and above. There, sitting on a high branch in a tree a dozen yards away, is Sevinarya. Swinging her legs back and forth, the masked Dark Elf tilts her head to the side, her red eyes surveying their grisly work for a moment.

"You're quite the pair of killers, aren't you? Poor spiders don't stand a chance against you~"

Beside him, Camilla is taut as a strung bow, tense and ready for action. Thomas holds out a hand to keep her back because even if they do end up going with Plan B, now is not the time to implement it. There are way too many shadows for Sevinarya to slip into this deep in the Darkwoods and once she's gone, they'll never be able to find her.

Thomas knows that to be the case because ever since he found out the Dark Elf existed, he's been on the lookout for her tracks. Every time he and Camilla have entered the Darkwoods since making the deal with Sevinarya, Thomas has been looking for any sign of where the Dark Elf goes after she leaves Last Hope.

He hasn't seen even a glimpse of her until now. No tracks, no broken branches, nothing that would allow him to hunt her down. And he feels pretty good in saying that such things just don't exist at this point (rather than him missing them) because by now he's actually become quite the skilled and accomplished hunter.

In fact, he hadn't caught her approaching them at all, and his enhanced senses are practically superhuman at this point. Meaning she'd shown up just now, probably through use of that shadow travel ability of hers.

“... What do you want, Sevinarya? We still have three more weeks to find and slay the Spider-Queen.”

“Mm, that’s right, you do. But remember... you told me to come find you if I wanted to learn more about you. No more demanding that the darling over in town reports to me, yes? So I’m just here to... express my interest~”

Thomas narrows his eyes, clenching his jaw. On the one hand, he should really blow her off. They didn’t have time for this bullshit and that was her own damn fault. On the other hand... they didn’t have another lead today anyways and there was an opportunity here if he was willing to seize it.

“Sure. How about we make it fair though? You ask a question, I’ll answer it... but then you don’t get to ask another question until you answer one of my questions. Sound good?”

There’s a pause as Sevinarya stares at him. He likes to think she’s amazed by his audacity... and maybe a little impressed. Finally, the Dark Elf waves a hand through the air dismissively.

“Oh very well then, human. You have my attention... for now.”

Pushing the pommel of his halberd into the dirt, Thomas leans on it a bit.

“Fine, then you can start us off.”

That seems to please the Dark Elf, as he’d suspected it would. Straightening up, Sevinarya hums for a second, making a show of deciding her question. Until finally...

“What exactly saw you driven out here to the edge of your people’s civilization? The little mouse back in the town didn’t quite know the specifics, only that you were banished. What did you do to make them exile you?”

Thomas takes a deep breath before answering.

“I lied, cheated, and stole. Until eventually the people in charge couldn’t abide by it anymore. So now I’m here.”

From the side, he can feel Camilla look at him at that answer. Hopefully it’s obvious to the knight that he’s bullshitting right now but given how much of a meathead she can be sometimes, Thomas is fully prepared to explain things to her later. For now, he keeps his eyes on Sevinarya. It’s his turn, after all.

“Where can we find the Spider-Queen?”

Even if she answers nothing else, this will be enough to at least put them on the right path and-!

“That way.”

Thomas blinks as Sevinarya points in a seemingly random direction. It’s not quite in the opposite direction of Last Hope, but it is deeper into the Darkwoods. It’s also singularly unhelpful. A finger point isn’t going to help Thomas and Camilla find the Spider-Queen, not when it’s easy as all hell to get turned around in this place.

He commits the direction to memory all the same and can only hope Camilla does the same. Maybe they can venture that way for a couple more hours today before they start heading back, just to see if they get lucky and were already close enough.

“My turn, right? Hm... what drives you, human? What pushes you to such great heights?”

Thomas grits his teeth. This fucking... only, he can’t be too mad can he? After all, he’s lying out his ass right now. At least she’s hopefully giving them somewhat actionable information.

“... A desire to prove myself. That’s what drives me. I want to show everyone back home that they were wrong about me.”

His words hang in the air for a moment before Sevinarya hums and nods. Thomas considers whether or not he should ask her to be more specific about the Spider-Queen's location, but he suspects that wouldn't go any better. Instead, maybe it's best to get an idea of what they're up against.

"How big is the Spider-Queen, exactly?"

Sevinarya's red eyes stare at him for a moment before she responds.

"Big."

Thomas' already slightly frayed self-control snaps and he lets out a growl, gripping the haft of his halberd harder.

"I don't see why I should keep answering questions if your answers are going to continue being so obtuse. This is a transaction of information, a two-way road if you will. You're not giving me much to work with here, Sevinarya."

The Dark Elf... lets out a bark of laughter at that.

"I could say the same to you, Lordling. Shall I give you all the answers you desire in exchange for the lies you spout?"

That... shit. Thomas straightens up, even as Camilla bristles at his side and points her sword in Sevinarya's direction.

"You dare call my lord a liar?"

The Dark Elf looks supremely unconcerned, even going so far as to cross one leg over the other.

"When he lies to me, yes I do. Answer for answer, truth for truth, no? Am I supposed to pretend like every word out of your mouth isn't a falsehood? Am I supposed to smile and nod and eat the shit you're trying to feed me?"

He's been caught. That's embarrassing. Beside him, Camilla is starting to shake with rage... but unfortunately, Sevinarya has the moral high ground here. She might not regarding literally anything else that's happened between her and Last Hope, but in this solitary, singular moment... she's right.

"Hold, Camilla. She's correct. I didn't tell the truth."

His confession takes the wind out of Camilla's sails. Obviously the red head had known he wasn't telling the truth, but she can't be angry at Sevinarya if he admits to it.

Sighing, Thomas nods to the Dark Elf on the branch above.

"I lied because the truth is much more fantastical. The fact of the matter is, I don't remember it. I don't remember anything before waking up in the carriage on the way to Last Hope. Everything before that is a blank and while I've been informed of what I did to 'earn' my banishment, I don't actually remember doing those things."

He waits for her to call bullshit on this as well. He waits for her to say he's lying again. But instead, Sevinarya watches him for a moment before slowly nodding.

"I believe you, human. That certainly sounds like an unfortunate set of circumstances."

... The hell? Was she trying to build a rapport with him or something? Thomas' eyes narrow as he stares up at her, trying to figure out what her game is. She stares back at him, as mysterious as ever what with that mask of hers.

Well, since he'd answered her first question more honestly, he might as well try to ask his again, right?

"So... where can we find the Spider-Queen?"

Without missing a beat, Sevinarya points once more in the exact same direction.

“That way.”

Alright, this fucking bitch... Thomas grits his teeth.

“I’m not sure there’s much value in us continuing this exchange of information, Sevinarya.”

To his surprise, he actually catches the corners of her eyes crinkling in what he thinks is a sign that she’s smiling at him.

“Well, if that’s how you feel Thomas... goodbye for now.”

His eyes widen and he takes a step forward, reaching out for her.

“Wait-!”

But she’s already flipped backwards over the branch she was sat upon... and the other side was clearly shadowed enough that she doesn’t appear again, disappearing completely from view and never actually falling off like she should have. She’s just... gone.

Damn it all to hell... that was less than productive. As Thomas meets Camilla’s eyes, he doesn’t say it out loud because who knows if Sevinarya is still watching. However, he does give the female knight a slight nod even as they both turn in the direction Sevinarya pointed at.

Plan B was looking more and more like it would be better as Plan A at this rate...

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A/N: Thomas is finally starting to realize our resident Dark Elf might be full of shit...

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!

