

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

A/N: Eloise has a conversation with Royalty~

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Eloise Harper had known that things in the Capital would be different from how they were back in Last Hope. She wasn't an idiot. But no amount of bracing herself had prepared the brunette for how it actually was. First, the destruction of House Marlow. Then, the attempt at capturing them from House Godman. Followed by an 'invitation' that wasn't really an invitation from the King.

Combine all of that with the sheer amount of people in such a small pace and the sheer size of the buildings that she found herself being ushered in and out of at a breakneck pace and it was... it was all too much. Eloise couldn't help but be overwhelmed. Frankly, she felt like she was drowning on dry land sometimes.

And it had all happened so fast too. Back in Last Hope, before Thomas' arrival major events had been measured in years. Entire weeks could go by without anything more stressful than taking care of her bedridden father happening. Even after his arrival, even with things speeding up, it had still been something every other week or once a month.

Not... multiple insane things in mere days. They'd been in the Capital for less than a *week* and already Sevvie had saved the King's daughter and Thomas and Sevvie had run off to find proof of House Godman's crimes.

Meanwhile, Eloise... Eloise just sat around and did nothing. Because she could do nothing... because in the end, she wasn't a warrior. She wasn't a fighter. She didn't know how to defeat an evil noble house bent on taking over the Kingdom, nor did she know how to save Princess Anna from an even more advanced case of Rot Lung than her own father had suffered.

There wasn't much of anything that Eloise could do to effect current circumstances... so when Princess Anna had asked for her personally on this

surprisingly fine morning, Eloise had leapt at the chance to meet with the other woman. Even if part of her was mortified by the thought of her, just a simple and plain Mayor's daughter, conversing with the Princess of the entire Kingdom.

One day, Anna would be Queen. And what would Eloise be? She would be Thomas' tagalong, his servant in all but name because even if he cared about her as more than that, it was all she was good for.

Still, she was desperate for something. Anything, really. And so she steps out into the Palace Garden, escorted by one of the Palace's maids to where Princess Anna is sitting waiting for her. There are Royal Guards nearby, watching from the borders of the garden, but otherwise Princess Anna is alone as Eloise is brought right to her.

"Your Highness, Thomas Marlow's maid is here."

Thomas Marlow's maid. Not Eloise or Eloise Harper or Miss Harper. Eloise doesn't sigh... but it's a near thing. Meanwhile, the Princess looks at her for a moment before smiling warmly.

"I can see that, yes. That will be all, Evelyn."

The Palace Maid bows at the waist, hands clasped in front of her. Then, she turns on her heel and walks away, back ramrod straight. Eloise watches her go for a moment, wondering if she might be able to learn some skills here in the Palace... before remembering herself and focusing back on the matter at hand.

"Your Highness. It's an honor to meet you."

The Princess' smile grows a bit and she shakes her head.

"The honor is all mine. Eloise Harper, isn't it? Please, sit with me."

Eloise swallows, a little caught off guard that the Princess knew her name when even the servants didn't seem to care. She's also caught off guard by the offer to sit, even as Princess Anna gestures to the chair across from her.

Finally, she just nods and takes a seat. Then, unable to help herself, she takes a moment to study Princess Anna properly. The Princess is currently swaddled in blankets as she sits peacefully, clearly still recovering from her brush with death but already looking much improved.

But then to be fair, the Princess is likely to have access to the best potions made by the best apothecaries in the Kingdom. With the Rot Lung expelled from her, all of those curatives and tinctures would be at Princess Anna's disposal to get her back into tip top shape as soon as possible.

"You... wished to speak with me, Princess?"

The beautiful blonde hums, looking out at the garden for a moment before finally responding.

"Yes, I did. I'm give to understand that you are one of Thomas Marlow's retinue, are you not? A servant alongside his Dark Elf maid... Seevi, wasn't it?"

Eloise hesitates... but all of this has to be common knowledge for the Princess. She might not have ever been allowed in the room where it happened, but she knew for a fact that Seevi had been giving Princess Anna numerous healing sessions all week long to cure her of her Rot Lung.

"... Yes Your Highness, that is correct. Seevi and I serve Lord Thomas to the best of our abilities."

Princess Anna turns her gaze to Eloise, an intrigued glint in her eye. There's no mention of the fact that Thomas technically isn't a Lord yet. He will be soon, after all, and everything his family left behind will become his. It's a formality at this point.

"The best of your abilities... do *you* have abilities beyond that of a normal maid, Eloise? Do you have your own set of skills like Seevi or Dame Ackinworth?"

Eloise goes still, flushing at that. The Princess couldn't know she'd hit upon a particular pain point, could she? Surely not... and yet, again there doesn't seem to be any reason to lie. Anyone with a single ounce of martial prowess can almost certainly sense that Eloise is harmless... weak.

"No Your Highness, I'm afraid not. I'm simply a young woman from a small village. Lord Thomas was kind enough to take pity on me and take me into his service so that I could see the world by his side."

Okay, so maybe she's telling a little bit of a lie. After all, Eloise hadn't left Last Hope to see the world... she'd left Last Hope to stay by Thomas' side. Only now, so far from home and with Thomas nowhere in sight, was she left wondering if she'd made the right decision or not.

"I see. He 'took pity on you', did he? Tell me, Eloise... do you miss your home? Do you regret taking Thomas Marlow's 'offer'."

Pulled from her momentary musings, Eloise blinks for a moment... before a well of indignation rises up within her. She might be some country bumpkin not even fit to share air with a Princess like Anna, but she wasn't an idiot! She could easily read between the lines here... she understood what the Princess was insinuating!

"I must strongly protest your insinuations, Your Highness! Thomas Marlow is a good man... an honest man. If you are trying to ask whether he forced me into his service or not, he didn't. And while I might miss Last Hope very much, I owe Lord Thomas too much to abandon him... now or ever!"

By the time she's done speaking, she's raised her voice a bit... enough that she senses movement out of the corner of her eye and glances over to see one of the Royal Guards has his hand on the pommel of his sword. Paling a bit as she realizes what she's just done and who she's just spoken so... aggressively too, Eloise turns back to Princess Anna.

However, before she can apologize, the Princess cuts her off.

“I’m sorry.”

Blinking owlishly, Eloise is taken aback completely as Princess Anna, who’s smile has dropped at this point, sighs.

“I should not have spoken like that about something I clearly do not fully understand. You have my apologies, Eloise.”

And then, even crazier, the Princess inclines her head in acknowledgment of her mistake. It’s only slight, not even close to a proper bow of course, but even this much is enough to leave Eloise a stuttering mess.

“N-No... it’s fine Your Highness... there’s no need for you to apologize to me. It was just a misunderstanding...”

Nodding along, Princess Anna smiles softly once more.

“Then let us do away with such things and speak plainly to one another. Your Master... is an enigma to me. We’ve barely spoken to one another so perhaps that’s to be expected... but he is also an enigma to my father.”

Wait, what? Eloise blinks at that, caught completely off guard. This prompts the Princess to giggle a little bit.

“Oh, my father won’t admit it of course. He’s the King after all, so he’s not supposed to be having trouble pinning down the true nature of his subjects... especially the one subject who he’s relying on the most right now to save him from the traitors aiming their daggers at his back. And yet... I can tell that Thomas Marlow baffles my father.”

Suddenly pinning Eloise with her gaze, Princess Anna tilts her head to the side.

“May I ask you a question regarding your Master on my father’s behalf?”

Swallowing thickly, Eloise squirms for a moment before straightening up and squaring her shoulders.

“If... if it does not betray Lord Thomas’ confidence, I will answer to the best of my ability, Your Highness.”

“That is all I can ask of you, Eloise. Then, let me put it as simply as possible; what does Thomas Marlow want?”

Huh? Eloise’s confusion prompts another sigh from the Princess.

“It is baffling to have a man like him, with a reputation like he has... just aid my family without asking for anything in return. The moment that his Dark Elf servant was able to prove she could heal me even a little bit, he could have asked for anything and my father would have been hard pressed to justify rejecting his requests. And once it became clear that your Master was so incredibly valuable to rooting out House Godman’s corruption, he also could have asked for things. He has not. It has my father very concerned.”

Eloise struggles to follow along as Princess Anna explains things from her (and apparently the King’s) point of view. By the time the Princess is done talking, she... thinks she understands? It sounds as though both the Princess and King don’t understand why Thomas is simply helping them and not asking for anything in return.

To be fair, Eloise gets it... actually, she gets it better than most would, probably. A small smile begins to spread across her face, prompting a raised eyebrow from Princess Anna.

“Something humorous, my dear?”

“No... it’s just... you were right to ask me this, Your Highness. I’m probably the best suited for explaining this to you. Put simply... Lord Thomas doesn’t want anything. I mean, besides being reaffirmed by your father as Lord Marlow and given his inheritance, I’m s-sure. But beyond that... he isn’t helping you and the King for material gain or any sort of specific reward. He’s helping... because it’s the right thing to do.”

Princess Anna stares at Eloise, seeming quite... stupefied by her words. To her credit, Eloise understands her shock quite well. It had been her too, once upon a time, months ago when Thomas had forgiven her almost immediately for betraying him and everyone else to Sevv. And then he'd forgiven her for her perverse behavior as well... and ultimately even accepted her into his bed.

"The right thing to do..."

Eloise nods emphatically for a moment before remembering something she'd been told.

"You should understand, Your Highness. Wasn't it when you were trying to help those of the Kingdom afflicted by Rot Lung that you contracted the magical disease yourself? House Godman used your own good nature against you, trying to poison the charitable work you were doing by making it into the thing that seemingly got you sick. You're a good person too, just like Lord Thomas. The both of you care about people... even at your own expense."

Princess Anna's mouth opens... and then closes, the beautiful blonde flushing at Eloise's praise. She looks entirely caught off guard by it, squirming a bit in her chair before getting herself back under control. And yet, even once she does get herself back under control, she looks a little smaller... like she's feeling shy all the sudden.

"Eloise... would you tell me more about him?"

Blinking again, Eloise hesitates.

"About Lord Thomas?"

The Princess nods.

"It sounds like his time in Last Hope was quite eventful. He's not the man that those here in the Capital says he is, is he?"

Hah, she didn't even know the half of it. Lord Thomas was literally not the same man who had left the Capital behind in disgrace all those months ago. But of course, Eloise isn't about to say *that*. Instead...

"I would be happy to tell you of his actions, Your Highness. From his heroics... to all of the little ways he helped around Last Hope. Without him, the town of my birth would be gone at this point."

Princess Anna leans in close, her curiosity quickly piqued. And so Eloise realizes... this was what she could do for Thomas. This was a way that she could help that perhaps nobody else could. She couldn't fight like Sevvie or Camilla; she didn't have healing abilities like Sevvie... but this much she can do.

And so Eloise begins to tell her all about Thomas Marlow and the things he'd done. If anyone should know what a hero Lord Thomas is... it's the Princess. After all, she's set to be Queen one day now that he and Sevvie have saved her life.

If nothing else, Princess Anna should have the best opinion of Lord Thomas as humanly possible!

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A/N: I know there hasn't been much but what are people thinking of Anna so far?

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!