

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

**A/N: The new normal.**

**-x-X-x-**

Things settle down in the days following his and Camilla's titanic fight with the King of the Forest. That's not to say Thomas himself starts to get lazy or rest on his laurels... but there's certainly a lot less urgency and franticness involved in his day to day with the King of the Forest dead and the Dire Wolf attacks completely abated.

As soon as possible, they had back into the Darkwoods, back to where the King of the Forest was slain, taking some of Last Hope's more able-bodied townsfolk with them. Luckily, the corpse has been largely left undisturbed, so they're able to lug back both the headless body and the decapitated head to Last Hope.

Thanks to all the work Thomas had made for Lahn the Tanner with the normal Dire Wolf Pelts, the man seems convinced that he can make even better leather armor out of the King of the Forest's tougher hide. His Gift of Leatherworking has increased in leaps and bounds since Thomas' arrival in Last Hope, apparently.

It will take some time though... but Thomas doesn't mind that one bit. In the meantime, he's gotten some help from others in preparing the wolf head. None of them know the word 'taxidermy' or anything like that, but they at least know enough to try and preserve the massive wolf head so that it can be put up in the entryway of the Mayor's House for all to take a look at. Proof that Last Hope was truly indomitable and that nobody was ever going to take their homes from them... not while Thomas was around anyways.

On top of that, the town's relationship with the Darkwoods had been irrevocably changed at this point. With the closest goblin tribe wiped out and now the large concentration of Dire Wolves leaving for a more target rich environment, the

edge of the Darkwoods closest to Last Hope was safer than it had been in decades.

Arnold the Apothecary still couldn't be bothered to enter the woods as he once had in his younger years though, complaining of aches and pains brought upon by his advanced age and all around being a cantankerous old man. However, the relative safety of the Darkwoods meant that more than just Thomas and Camilla were venturing in these days, and some of them were happy to bring back potions ingredients from their trips.

Even more of them were eager to go hunting more often than they did previously, something that was rather necessary after the numerous Dire Wolf attacks on Last Hope's farms. While the crops hadn't suffered too much beyond a bit of trampling in some places, the farm animals had definitely come out the other side of the crisis diminished.

There wouldn't be much meat coming from the town farms for a while, not when the farmers needed to come together and have their surviving animals focus on breeding the next generation so that they weren't in danger of dying out entirely. Last Hope was still self-sustaining in spite of what it had been through, but things were a lot tighter than they'd been previously.

That was where the hunters came in though. With the absence of both goblins and wolves, other animals were showing up in greater numbers in the Darkwoods' edge. Prey animals, to be exact, and in great enough numbers that there was no shortage of meat in Last Hope in the ensuing days despite the lack of ready-for-slaughter farm animals.

Hell, even Thomas had taken up the bow recently... as well as a number of other weapons that he hadn't learned yet. The reasoning was simple, really... he could feel himself hitting a plateau with the spear and halberd, a plateau he didn't exactly have a way past.

After all, at this point he was... well, his and Camilla's fights tended to go very differently from how they'd gone back at the start. Thomas was now fast and strong enough to be able to not only match Camilla's speed but also surpass it.

On top of that, he was capable of overpowering her now in a way he hadn't been before, forcing her to go on the defensive... when he didn't have her in a full blown retreat.

It was a bit of a sore point for the female knight, Thomas was aware. After all, fighting was Camilla's whole thing. To be not just surpassed but thoroughly upstaged in a matter of months... well, at least switching to other weapons meant that it took Thomas a couple weeks before he was back to dominating their spars again with each one.

Yes, for all that things had settled down, they definitely hadn't returned to the way they were before. Thomas was still pushing, still striving to improve, albeit in different ways. Learning to hit a deer with a bow from greater and greater distances in the Darkwoods, learning to fight with sword and axe and anything else Thomas could think of and have Beatrice craft for him.

And of course, he'd continued his lessons with Apothecary Arnold as well. Not to mention that he was also continuing his own training sessions with those of the town who wanted to learn how to fight from him. Sure, Last Hope was no longer in any danger from the King of the Forest, but that didn't mean it would be safe and peaceful for the rest of time...

Thomas couldn't help but feel like his go-getter can-do attitude was rubbing off on the townsfolk a little bit. Funny how he'd shirked all leadership responsibilities onto Eloise way back at the start of this mess... only to find himself leading by example now anyways.

Though... speaking of Eloise, Thomas was worried about her. In a sea of good vibes and things feeling all copacetic, Eloise was the one issue. Namely, she'd taken to avoiding him, barely able to string two words together in the days since the King of the Forest had been slain.

No, that wasn't quite right was it? She'd talked just fine in the immediate aftermath of their fight against the hulking oversized Dire Wolf. She'd been an active part of their conversation about the elven woman who saved him and the strange, curved dagger she'd left behind.

... It wasn't until after that night, after his and Camilla's first time together, that Eloise had become distant. Was it possible that they hadn't been quiet enough? The Mayor's house was a sturdy piece of construction, with thick walls that mostly muffled any noise. However, Thomas couldn't say for sure that they hadn't been... overheard.

If that was the case, it was a bit mortifying. If Eloise had heard them and was embarrassed about it, well... Thomas figured he should apologize. Unfortunately, it becomes an issue of getting a proper talk with the mousy brunette. Every time he tries, she finds a way to slip away from him. He's not out to trap her or anything like that, so he always lets her go of course, but it's still frustrating.

There's one place Thomas knows Eloise spends time that she won't be able to just blow him off, however. Her father's office, where she takes care of any mayoral duties that have built up at least once a week. Admittedly, Thomas has never bothered her here before, mostly because he doesn't want to distract her from the work he doesn't want to be doing... but desperate times call for desperate measures.

And so one fine sunny day, when he should technically either be out in the Darkwoods hunting fresh game or over at the Apothecary's Hut learning from Arnold, Thomas instead finds himself sneaking down the hall towards Eloise's office.

He knows he probably shouldn't be engaging in such skullduggery, but he doesn't want to alert her to his presence early, only for her to make up an excuse to slip away again. And... his recent spat of hunting has given him a lot of stealth training. If he can move quietly enough through the Darkwoods to avoid scaring off his prey, he can certainly move quietly enough through a hallway.

... The weird thing is, as Thomas gets closer to the office door, he thinks he hears voices from within. More than one, to be specific. There's Eloise's muffled

tone... but there's someone else as well. It shouldn't be Camilla, so maybe it's one of the other townsfolk?

Reaching the door itself, Thomas carefully presses his ear against it and listens in.

"I've already told you everything knew! Lord Thomas is training in new weapons and has recently taken up hunting in the Darkwoods. That's it!"

"Truly? You expect me to believe a man like that, after the experience he just had, is willing to just... take it easy?"

"You're not listening to me! He's not taking it easy... he's just not looking for something else to risk his life. He's not like that, he cares about self-improvement, but he would never have fought the King of the Forest if you hadn't brought it here and had it threaten Last Hope!"

"... Now, now darling, throwing around spurious accusations like that... what would your father think?"

"He'd agreed with me! You and I both know that the King should never have come this close to the forest's edge. You brought that damn monster here to force Lord Thomas to take action... all so you could get in close with him by saving his life! What are you even playing at with that anyways?!"

"Mm... has he mentioned me again, I wonder? Is he curious about me?"

"No, not that I know of. Aside from talking about you and your dagger, he hasn't mentioned you even once. I suppose you didn't have the impact you wanted on him."

"Oh sweetie... there's no need to get vicious with me. Honestly, just because he wound up laying with the knight before you..."

"S-Shut up! Just... shut up!"

With his ear pressed against the door, Thomas stares forward blankly, processing everything he's hearing. Eloise's voice is familiar as ever of course, while the second woman is decidedly not. The stranger's voice is richer and a little bit deeper... sultry would be a word Thomas might use for her.

Of course, after hearing them talk, he's quite confident that he can put a face to the voice... or at least a shadowy body anyways. This is the elven woman who saved him from the King of the Forest, sacrificing one of her daggers to distract the monstrous Dire Wolf at a critical moment so Thomas could deliver the killing blow without dying in the process.

... The problem was, it sounded like she and Eloise knew each other. More than that, it sounded like Eloise believed that this elven woman was the reason the King of the Forest came so close to Last Hope in the first place.

Had Eloise betrayed him? Worse, had she betrayed her people, the town that was relying on her? Why would she do that? It stung a little bit that she was apparently reporting on him to this elf, but it stung even worse that she'd known exactly who was behind the Dire Wolf attacks and hadn't told anyone.

"Really, if you want me to 'shut up', I can always leave... I can tell when I'm not wanted somewhere."

"Wha- no! You... y-you have to help my father first. Please, you promised!"

"Hmph... I don't remember promising anything, my dear. But I suppose... I'll meet you there like always."

Thomas' eyes widen as he hears footsteps heading to the door. In an instant, he turns and presses himself flat against the wall right next to the door. A moment later it swings open and Eloise steps out... but she turns away from him, in too much of a rush to pay her surroundings any mind as she hurries down the hall towards her father's bedroom.

He'd thought as much, which was why he'd chosen this specific side of the door to hide on. Heh, his stealth instincts were coming in clutch he supposed.

That said, nobody else comes out of the office after Eloise... and the elf had said something about 'meeting' the brunette there. So, after a moment to let Eloise disappear around the corner, Thomas follows after her, sneakily as ever.

He reaches the door to Mayor Harper's bedroom just in time for Eloise to swing it shut behind her. As a result, he's able to arrest it's momentum just before it would have closed, holding it open just a crack as though Eloise simply didn't use enough strength to ensure it shut all the way.

This allows him to peek into the room beyond, taking in the room with one eye. His mysterious elven savior is already there waiting when Eloise arrives, giving Thomas a much better view of her than he'd had previously. Her leather armor is all pitch black and her mask covers everything except for her red eyes and long, sharp, dark-skinned ears.

A Dark Elf maybe? It would make sense, especially if she came from within the Darkwoods. Still, Thomas watches with a furrowed brow as the Dark Elf waves a hand across Mayor Harper... and he grows visibly healthier right before their eyes.

Eloise lets out a shaky gasp of relief upon seeing this, while Thomas just frowns. So... this was the source of Mayor Harper's gradual improvement over these past few months. The man was still an invalid most of the time, but that was a vast improvement over ALL of the time.

... He'd really thought that Eloise had found some secret regimen of purging potions that was able to cure her father without killing him. Hell, he'd been looking forward to Mayor Harper being back up and in action, because he figured then Eloise wouldn't be so stressed all the time.

But this was... was it even a proper cure? That was the big question that rattled around in Thomas' skull. Was this elf just leading Eloise on and giving her false hope? Because if she was... then Thomas wasn't sure he could forgive that. Everything else... restitution could be paid and something could be worked out. But dangling Eloise's hope in front of her would just be cruel.

Of course, the problem now was simple enough... Thomas had seen too much. The cat was out of the bag and he knew the truth. Which begged the question... what the fuck was he supposed to do now?

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**A/N: Ruh roh.**

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