

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

A/N: Thomas and the King continue their chat with a bit more privacy.

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“Tell me... what do you know of the Rotlands and the history surrounding them?”

They’ve left the Princess’ bedroom behind at this point. In fact, it’s just Thomas and the King now, having retired to the monarch’s personal study. Sevvie has rejoined Eloise and Camilla, and Thomas was assured they would all be given food and drink while they waited.

Separating from the three of them was still nerve wracking to say the least, but Thomas had full faith in both Sevvie and Camilla to defend themselves as well as Eloise until he could rejoin them... if it came to that.

Still, it didn’t look like it would, thankfully. For the time being, everything seemed like it was going to work out for the best. They had what the King wanted, an outright cure for his daughter, and so long as Princess Anna’s life no longer lay in the hands of House Godman and their ‘specialist’, the King seemed far more predisposed to Thomas and his cause than that of his enemies.

Sitting in a high back chair across from the King now, nursing a goblet of wine he’d been offered, Thomas considers King Ashwood’s question for a long moment before answering.

“Not as much as I perhaps should. I know that the Rotlands came out of nowhere. I know that it left the Kingdom greatly diminished in terms of land

and resources. And I know that House Godman and their allies were behind the creation of the white lanterns that hold the Rotlands at bay even now. That was why they were elevated from mere merchants to full nobility, right?”

The King nods, looking somewhat weary for a moment as he sighs.

“... Indeed. To give a bit more personal context, the Rotlands manifested when I was barely a year into my reign. My father had just passed and I was a young King, untested. At first I saw the Rotlands as a mere challenge, something to show that I was just as fit to rule as my father was. By the time I realized it was an existential threat, it had developed into a full blown crisis.”

Thomas grimaces, imagining it. King Ashwood was no spring chicken now, but he must have been quite young back then. In his early twenties at best. To suddenly be confronted with such a thing, the slowly building dread and realization that you didn’t have the tools, skills, or resources to stop it... it must have been awful.

“When the merchants came with their white light invention, I was of course ecstatic. It worked, the Rotlands were stopped in their tracks and the Kingdom finally had a chance to breathe... and start recovering. Of course, the white lanterns were merely a defensive measure... they were not a way to take back the land we’d already lost. And we lost much before their advent. Enough to put things in... a rather tight spot. I suddenly had more landless nobles crying for succor here in the Capital than I knew what to do with... and I had these merchant families who had provided me the solution to my problem that needed to be rewarded.”

Thomas could see where this was going, but it was still interesting to hear it from the King’s perspective. It recontextualized some things, he supposed.

When Camilla had told him of these events, she made it sound like some great political battle between House Marlow and House Godman had taken place. The old guard versus the new, with the King stuck in the middle playing the peacekeeper until everyone had settled into a sort of unhappy compromise.

But the way the King was talking...

"I sided with our saviors more than I probably should have back then. I sundered some of our most ancient noble houses simply because they no longer had the land and wealth to back up their blood claims. At the same time, I forced others to give up some of their land to the new nobility I sought to raise, bringing House Godman and those like them to the forefront."

There's a pause as the King takes a long draw from his own wine goblet. Then, he gives Thomas a piercing stare.

"I was a fool."

Thomas furrows his brow in response. Perhaps he's supposed to agree with the King here, seeing as he's on the side of House Marlow and certainly *not* on the side of House Godman. But...

"It sounds to me like you did the best you could with the options available to you at the time, Your Majesty."

The King blinks, clearly surprised to see Thomas standing up to his monarch... on his monarch's behalf. After a moment, he smiles tiredly.

"That's kind of you to say, Thomas Marlow. But no... I did what I did brashly and recklessly, uncaring of the damage I caused to the foundations of this

Kingdom. And in doing so, I didn't bother looking behind the curtain. I didn't even consider lifting up the tarp to see what lay underneath it."

Huh? Thomas frowns, even more confused than before. But before he can ask the King to clarify, the monarch waves his hand... and another man appears beside him in a familiar burst of shadow. Thomas stiffens but otherwise doesn't react, even as this newcomer stares him down for a long moment.

"This is Spymaster Qyvern. He is my right hand man and someone I trust with just about everything. He is also, I'm afraid, not doing a very good job of understanding who and what you are so far, Thomas Marlow. I've told him not to take it personally but..."

Thomas arches a brow, now able to understand why Spymaster Qyvern is looking at him so intensely, like he's a particularly hard puzzle that the other man can't quite decipher. Smiling as blandly as he can manage, Thomas dips his head in greeting.

"Pleasure to meet you, Spymaster."

Qyvern huffs, prompting a chuckle from the King who then gestures again.

"Tell him."

There's the briefest of pauses before the Spymaster speaks.

"We have reason to believe that the cause of the Rotlands can be traced back to House Godman and their allies. And that they ultimately developed a solution to a problem that they themselves created in order to rise to prominence."

That... Thomas takes a moment to slowly absorb that. It was more than he was expecting. Then again, after turning the idea over in his head a couple of times, he can't deny that it fits. House Godman and these other new blood noble houses... they all started out as merchants.

And while every good merchant knew how to take advantage of opportunities that fell into their laps... the best merchants went out of their way to *create* those opportunities. No matter who it hurt or what it cost others along the way.

His previous world's history was littered with examples of that. Too many for Thomas to even count, really. That the humans of this world had fallen into the same trap, showcasing the same sort of hubris... it honestly didn't surprise him at all.

The only strange thing was...

"How? The Rotlands are magical, right? Rot Lung is a magical disease. If House Godman had access to such powerful magic that no one else in the Kingdom has found a way to reverse all this time... then why aren't they in charge around here by this point?"

Spymaster Qyvern bristles at that, scowling angrily at the mere idea that King Ashwood might be... deposed. But the King just raises a hand, cutting his Spymaster off while smiling grimly.

"We don't know."

Thomas stares blankly, prompting a shrug from the monarch.

"It's the truth. We do not know where they came by such magic. We don't know why they haven't done more with it. Obviously, since realizing the true

depths of their treachery, I've done everything I could to shore up my defenses and combat their greedy attempts at grabbing more and more power... but they certainly seem to be taking their time with things, even when they make big moves like killing your family."

His mind racing, Thomas considers it for a moment... and then it hits him.

"The Dark Elves."

Spymaster Qyvern jolts at that, while the King merely raises a brow. Stepping forward, the Spymaster narrows his eyes.

"What are you talking about? What about them?"

It seems so obvious to Thomas. Is he crazy or is he right on the money? Well... there's no point in holding back at this point, is there?

"The Dark Elves must be behind this. They have a magical cure for Rot Lung that's miles better than the best human potions. And you said it yourself; House Godman's specialist is a Dark Elf Male. Except, according to Sevvī no Dark Elf Male would be allowed this far from their territory... unless he was sent here by someone with real authority."

King Ashwood and his Spymaster exchange a look at that. Thomas can tell they're taking his idea seriously... and after a moment, Qyvern grimaces and inclines his head.

"It... would explain a lot."

The King grunts, leaning back in his chair looking quite disgruntled.

“Why though? The Dark Elves are deep in the Darkwoods, are they not? We barely interact with them to begin with! Why bring about the Rotlands? Why support House Godman? Why do *any* of this to us?”

Thomas thinks back to the conversation he’d wound up participating in back in Sevv’s hideout months before. That conversation, between Sevv and her mother, the Dark Elf Queen, had been very illuminating at the time. It had basically shown him why Sevv was the way she was. But now, looking back at it... it feels illuminating for another reason entirely.

“Because they can.”

Both the King and his Spymaster startle at that, giving him incredulous looks. Thomas just shrugs.

“From what little I know of the Dark Elves, they’re sadistic creatures by nature. They like to play political games... and they aren’t in a rush either. For you, Your Majesty, it’s been a lifetime since the Rotlands came. For the likes of House Godman, their ascent has been the work of two generations now. But for a Dark Elf, this is nothing but a blink of the eye for them. They don’t need to give House Godman enough to depose you quickly because they don’t truly need to do anything quickly. They can do everything at their own pace, allowing your powerbase to slowly but steadily erode even if it takes decades.”

Both King Ashwood and Spymaster Qyvern are staring at Thomas by the time he’s done talking. Feeling slightly self-conscious, Thomas feels like he has to tack on a bit of a disclaimer.

“That is... if I’m right of course. I could still be wrong about all of this.”

After another long moment, the King slowly shakes his head.

“No... no, I don't think you are. Which means this isn't just some uppity merchants who I let get too big, too fast. We are at war... and we didn't even know it.”

Thomas winces. From what little Sevvie has told him of her people, he's not sure being at war with them will be very fun. Though also, he's not even sure how such a war would be waged. They're so far away... and besides would the Dark Elves really want to live outside of the Darkwoods anyways? Sevvie seems fine so far, but she's not exactly your typical Dark Elf, no matter how rocky things had been with her at the start.

“... Not that it matters. We would still need to deal with House Godman before anything else. And unfortunately, that brings us right back around to the point of this entire conversation.”

The King's words pull Thomas from his thoughts and he gives the monarch his full attention, even as King Ashwood looks contemplative.

“We need proof of House Godman's involvement in the creation of the Rotlands. But more than that, we need a way to either do away with the Rotlands altogether... or at the very least end our reliance on the white lanterns that House Godman and their allies produce.”

Ah. There was the rub of it. The Rotlands were only held at bay by the very thing that House Godman and the other merchants had used to become Nobility in the first place. And without those white lanterns, the rest of the Kingdom would soon be overrun.

Except...

“You know, Your Majesty... the town of Last Hope has none of these white lanterns I’ve seen in the Capital. The lanterns that Last Hope uses to keep the Rotlands at bay... are blue.”

King Ashwood stares at him for a long moment... and then a hungry, voracious grin spreads across the other man’s face as he leans forward in his chair.

“Tell me more.”

Thomas is happy to, adopting a grin of his own to match the King’s as he explains how Last Hope fuels their ingenious blue lanterns with the naturally resistant entities found just within the Darkwoods.

Who knew that Last Hope and its decades-long cultivation of the edge of the Darkwoods would wind up being the solution to all of their problems? And wouldn’t you know it, Last Hope lay at the very edge of House Marlow lands as well...

Things were looking up for not just the King and his Kingdom, but Thomas as well. They just had to make sure that House Godman didn’t learn anything until it was too late. They would have to move fast and it probably wouldn’t be clean... but at long last, things were starting to look up.

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A/N: Hurray, everything is awesome!

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!

