

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

A/N: The wait comes to an end...

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Thomas stands at the ready, his trusty halberd held in his grasp, armor clinking lightly as he shifts in his stance slightly. His opponents number five in total and they stand across from him, all equally armed and armored. Live weapons. Full armor. No holding back.

“Come on then... come at me!”

His shout provokes them into moving. Thomas can't help but grin a little bit, even as the five 'lieutenants' all start forward, encircling him carefully and looking for any openings in his defense. Among them is Camilla... and, funnily enough, a certain Sir Alonses as well.

Camilla's old rival from her time as a squire had come a long way in the past couple of months. The man had an ego the size of a fucking castle, but a few days under Thomas' tutelage and they'd managed to start breaking him of his pride. Once he saw the results that came from being trained by his new King, the Knight Bachelor had been fully on board.

Thomas certainly hadn't anticipated him becoming one of the many lieutenants that eventually made up the backbone of Thomas' training regimen, but in the end he supposed he couldn't be too surprised. It took a certain kind of drive to be the best of the best, and that drive oftentimes came with a proper ego.

The whole 'humble but also a legendary warrior' trope tended to only be a thing in fiction. In the real world, much like pro athletes tended to be just a touch different from your average human being, so to did the sorts of people Thomas had found to help him prepare for Synestra's eventual attack.

Of course, even as Camilla, Alonses, and the other three all finally move in as one unit to try and take him down... Thomas is simply built different. He only moves right as they close the distance between him, shifting immediately to one side and sweeping with his halberd at blinding speed. He takes one of the five of them right in the leg with that and if it weren't the flat of his weapon, they'd have lost that leg.

The other four do make a valiant attempt to capitalize though, and it takes all that Thomas has to dodge out of the way of their strikes, weaving through their blows. He feels a slight strain as he does so, that bit of struggle that tells him that he's facing off against a number of opponents that, when combined, actually stand a chance of beating him.

They fight in a pit that's been carved out specifically for this purpose. Around them, the army camp has been completely constructed at this point, sprawling out around Last Hope in every direction except for the Rotlands.

This particular patch of land, his and Camilla's old training grounds from all those months ago, has been turned into the training yard for the entire army at this point. And here they are, honing their skills, trying their best to be ever ready, ever prepared for what comes next. More than that though is using the time they have as wisely as possible.

After all, every day that Synestra takes getting here, Thomas can tell that he's getting a little bit stronger. And in turn, that means he's making those around him stronger as well.

For instance, even as he goes in to disable another of the five he's facing off against, Camilla surprises him by managing to see his attack coming. She never could have reacted in time otherwise, but she correctly reads what he's going to do ahead of time... and puts herself in the way.

Thomas can't help but hesitate for a split fraction of a second, because of course he does when it's Camilla and not one of his other lieutenants. And Alonses immediately takes advantage of this to thrust his sword towards Thomas' chest, hoping to strike a proper blow on him for once.

It doesn't work, of course. Thomas blocks the sword with his halberd, deflecting it to the side in a single scooping motion. At the same time, he takes a step back to regain his bearings. They hadn't managed to actually hit him, but they had managed to stymie him briefly... and for that, Thomas is quite proud on him.

"I suppose I should stop taking it easy on all of you."

Nobody laughs. Nobody smiles. If anything, they all get grim, even Camilla. Staring at him intensely, it's clear they're all taking him very seriously. Good... because Thomas isn't joking. He moves and it's like night and day. Springing forth, Thomas takes out one of the others before they can even react. Then, a third.

Suddenly, its just Camilla and Alonses. The other three are on the ground, groaning and bemoaning their fates as his punching bags. But to their credit, neither Knight backs down, nor do they falter. And they certainly don't panic.

Instead, Camilla and Alonses have one another's backs, even as Thomas presses the assault. He moves in and they close ranks, looking to utilize one another to defend each other's blind spots from his halberd.

It won't be enough of course. It won't be nearly enough. But Thomas still can't help but grin at their progress, pleased with how far they've all come. Still, it's time to-

"My King."

Spymaster Qyvern's appearance at the edge of the fighting pit brings things to an abrupt halt. Thomas immediately pulls back as he looks to the other man, with everyone else following suit. As soon as he sees the serious look on Qyvern's face, Thomas doesn't hesitate. He bends his knees and leaps, clearing the distance with ease to land at the Spymaster's side up on the rim of the fighting pit.

"What is it?"

“They’re here.”

Two words Thomas has been dreading. Two words he’s been anticipating as well though. All of this extra time has been nice in one way and hellish in another. He hates the uncertainty of it all, but he’s also squeezed every last second out of every last hour out of every last day that Synestra had given him.

Alas, that’s clearly come to an end.

“They’ve been spotted in the Darkwoods then?”

But Qyvern grimaces and shakes his head.

“No, I’m afraid not.”

Thomas narrows his eyes, getting the impression that something is very, very wrong. In the end, he sets his jaw and steels himself for whatever is about to be revealed.

“Show me.”

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The Royal Spymaster does indeed show him. He takes Thomas right to one of Last Hope’s farms, specifically one of the abandoned ones. After all of the relevant news had finally reached the denizens of the small town, there had in fact been some people who chose to leave and relocate.

Thomas didn’t blame them truth be told. It was one thing to stand your ground against dangerous wildlife alongside your neighbors to defend your way of life. It was another thing entirely to stick around while your way of life was being irrevocably changed, the small town transforming into a fortress and winding up ballooning a hundred times over in population while everyone prepared for war.

Everyone, including the family who owned this farm, that decided to leave Last Hope behind had been fairly compensated and provisioned so they could relocate and make new lives for themselves elsewhere in the Kingdom. Not that it would matter if Synestra got her way and killed everyone and rotted all of the human lands, but not everyone was a fighter, simple as that.

Still, that was a tangent. The problem... well, the problem was immediately obvious once Qyvern showed Thomas what was going on. Amidst the army's supplies stockpiled on the farm... there was Rot. The Rotlands were half a mile away at least and held back by the lanterns... and yet here was Rot, nestled amidst the provisions they would need if they wanted to have a hope of defeating Synestra.

Fortunately, blue lanterns are already being used to contain the small patch of rot. But at the same time...

"How is this possible?"

Qyvern doesn't get a chance to answer him. Instead, Sevvii appears in an instant, shadowstepping right in front of them... holding a grotesque ball of pulsing flesh in her gloved fist.

"I found the source. It was buried deep underground, where the shadows are thickest."

Thomas stares at the origins of the Rot for a long moment before gritting his teeth. He should have known. He should have guessed that this would be how Synestra finally attacked them when she did arrive with her army. He... should have expected this.

Again, Synestra's words come back to him. Pest control, she'd called this. And did you combat pests with grand displays of armies marching against one another? Did you wait for the pests to gather themselves up into proper lines and meet you on the other side of a battlefield?

Of course you didn't. Especially not when you had access to shadow teleportation and a method by which you could simply eradicate the pests entirely without ever having to meet them in actual battle.

He'd spent all this time training his people to fight a conventional war. Or rather, perhaps not conventional... but he'd at least assumed there *would* be fighting. But the First Princess didn't intend to give them that courtesy. She was going to gas them out and take them down with her version of 'pesticides'.

Fuck!

"... Can it be destroyed, Sevi?"

The thoughtful look on Sevi's face is encouraging and discouraging at the same time. After a moment, she reaches over and grabs one of the blue lanterns shining down on the patch of rot on the ground. She lifts it up and brings it close to the globule of Living Rot.

Together, she, Qyvern, and Thomas all watch as the Living Rot tries to flee the blue light, even letting out a literal screech as Sevi brings both very close together. Her firm grip keeps the globule from going anywhere and all three of them are able to see in real time as the blue lantern outright kills the Living Rot, not just holding it at bay, but utterly slaughtering it until the thing is lifeless and grey in Sevi's grasp.

A slow breath leaves Thomas' lips as he sees that happen. Relief fills his chest... warring with the panic he nevertheless feels. Because... he doesn't for a single second believe this is it. He doesn't think for a moment that this is the only one of these that Synestra has dropped in his Kingdom.

"Qyvern, get your people together immediately. Gather up as many blue lanterns as you can get your hands on in short notice. Take part of the army and split up into as many groups as we have towns near the border with the Darkwoods."

The Spymaster is quite perceptive and not at all slow. His eyes narrow as he immediately picks up on Thomas' concern.

“Understood Your Majesty. Your orders will be followed immediately.”

As Qyvern leaves to do exactly that, Sevvi grimaces, also figuring out what Thomas is so worried about.

“You think this was only one of many.”

Thomas nods sharply, staring at the lifeless globule in Sevvi’s hand. If that was how the Rot spread, through Living Rot like this... then they had just found out how to fix the Rotlands. Build enough blue lanterns, spread them out far enough, and use Sevvi and anyone else with the Gift of Shadow to plumb the depths of the underground across the Rotlands.

Every globule of Living Rot they found could be expunged and maybe, just maybe, the rest of the human lands could be reclaimed. Synestra had just handed them a cure to their greatest ailment on a silver platter.

... But they couldn’t focus on that right now because they first had to stop Synestra from succeeding in rotting the rest of the Kingdom. And Thomas had no doubt that there were probably dozens of fresh Living Rot globs buried beneath the earth all across the untouched human lands.

“Your sister isn’t going to ever face us in battle, is she?”

Sevvi grimaces, her face twisting for a moment before she shakes her head.

“Not willingly, I don’t think. I thought... I figured she would want to do it herself. To come all this way, to bring her army... I thought she’d want to wipe us out with her own two hands. But I suppose I misjudged her intentions.”

Thomas just grunts.

“It’s fine. We know what we have to do now at least.”

When Sevvie gives him a curious look at that, Thomas offers her a grim smile that doesn't quite reach his eyes.

"The same thing I've been doing since I woke up in this world, really. I have to take the fight to her."

Whether it was the goblins, the King of the Forest, Sevvie herself, or House Godman... Thomas had never gotten ahead in this second life by stepping back and retreating. He only ever succeeded when he charged full steam ahead.

Synestra would regret coming here to these lands. Thomas would make sure of that.

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A/N: Dun Dun DUUUUUN!

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!