

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

A/N: Camilla's thoughts.

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As Lord Thomas stares at her mouth agape, Camilla shifts from foot to foot, waiting for him to get over his shock and finally reach the point of anger. Sure, she hadn't actually acted upon his mother's orders... but she still wouldn't blame him for being furious that she, the woman who was ostensibly supposed to be protecting him, had been ordered to kill him.

Alas, it was just as she'd told him. She couldn't do it. Three months might not seem like a long time, but it was certainly long enough for Camilla to turn the idea over in her head again and again, looking at it from every possible angle. And the truth was, when confronted with Thomas' actions these past three months and everything else that happened, Camilla was forced to acknowledge that there was no honor in assassinating the Young Lord.

If she did it, if she went through with Lady Marlow's orders, she would be tarnishing her honor forevermore, putting a stain on her very soul. Camilla refused to be party to the killing of the man in front of her, regardless of his crimes... because even if he was guilty of poisoning his brother, he had shown in these past three months that people could change and that he was not the monster his family or those back in the Capital believed him to be.

Of course, she's so busy waiting for Thomas to finally get angry with her that when he suddenly just shrugs, she's left completely taken aback.

"Well... suppose we'll burn that bridge when we get to it."

In that moment, Camilla is taken entirely out of her state of self-recrimination by the incredulity she feels at Thomas' words. This is not the first time he has said something strange with such... confidence. However, this particular statement definitely wins out over all the others for being completely and utterly insane.

There are no bridges anywhere near Last Hope, and even if there were, burning one down would only hurt the town in the long run! So what in the world was he going on about?! Most of the time, Camilla has started to simply let his strange manner of speaking pass her by, but this time she is forced to level a firm stare his way and call him out on it.

“Excuse me?”

Blinking, Thomas pauses... and then laughs.

“Oh, it’s just a saying. A combination of two sayings, actually. The first is a saying for not worrying too much about planning ahead. You say ‘we’ll cross that bridge when we get to it’ when you want to stay focused on the present, on the here and now.”

That... she could see the wisdom in such a statement, yes.

“The other saying is about ending relationships or making enemies. When you say you’re ‘burning bridges’ it means you’re disconnecting yourself from someone or a group of someones. More than likely because either you’re turning against them or they’ve turned against you.”

Again, she could see the wisdom. It was still an utterly baffling way of speaking though. Even if she now understood what he’d meant originally. She’d professed worry over what his family would do once they deduced that she wasn’t willing to kill him. And in turn, he’d said they would deal with any attacks from House Marlow as they came.

Of course, why he couldn’t just say that, Camilla honestly didn’t know...

“I suppose they really want me dead for my brother’s poisoning, don’t they? My ‘parents’.”

Camilla grimaces at that. Thomas doesn't look quite as distraught by this revelation as she would have thought he would be, but he does look a little melancholic as he glances off to the side.

"Well... it was your mother who gave me the orders. I don't know if your father knew about it or not. And I don't know who exactly was behind the poisoned pastries from the Capital either. All I know is that I cannot imagine a world where I strike you down in cold blood, Lord Thomas. You have proven you are not a villain worthy of my blade."

Silence falls between them and Camilla can't help but feel its an awkward once. Awkward for her at least. She squirms for a moment more before asking something she maybe should have asked months ago before relying upon assumptions to make up her mind without ever speaking to the man in front of her.

"... Did you do it, Lord Thomas? Did you poison your elder brother like they say?"

Thomas looks surprised for a moment by the question. Then, contemplative. Finally... a rueful smile spreads across his face and he shakes his head.

"Honestly? I don't know."

What. Camilla stares at the Young Lord in disbelief, causing him to shrug.

"You didn't believe me before, but maybe you'll believe me now. My amnesia is real, Dame Camilla. From the moment I woke up in the carriage across from you three months ago, I did not remember anything before that point. Everything I've learned since has been from you, Eloise, or the other inhabitants of Last Hope. Well, and the journal."

She's opening her mouth to call him out, her credulity stretched to its utmost limits by his words. But then he mentions a journal and she pauses.

"... What journal do you speak of?"

Thomas shrugs.

“I found a journal in my luggage that first day we arrived in Last Hope. I read through it and from what I understand, it was a look at the man I once was. However... that man and me are not the same person. I felt nothing while reading his words... save for a bit of disdain and disgust. The Lord Thomas Marlow who wrote that journal was a spoiled, ignorant brat of a nobleman with a chip on his shoulder. He was, to put it plainly, an asshole of the highest order.”

Camilla just stares, taking this in, trying to process what he's saying. Seeing her abject shock, Thomas shrugs again, smiling crookedly.

“Except... for all the journal says about a lot of the crimes the previous Thomas Marlow got up to, even it couldn't tell me if he actually poisoned his brother or not. The entry that speaks on said poisoning is frustratingly vague and extremely self-aggrandizing as he makes himself out to be the villain. So when I say I don't know who poisoned Martin Marlow... I'm telling you the truth, Dame Camilla. Because I honestly don't.”

It feels like she's taken a physical blow to the head, even as she finds herself reordering everything she thought she knew, as well as recontextualizing the events of the past three months. If Thomas was telling the truth, if he really had woken up that day in the carriage with no memories... then it certainly made a lot of things make a lot more sense.

And the journal... the journal was the final piece of the puzzle, wasn't it? What Camilla had taken to be Thomas giving up on pretending like he'd lost his memories had actually been the amnesiac Young Lord gaining access to a source of knowledge in the form of those journal entries. Combined with everyone in Last Hope willing to talk to him while he was performing backbreaking labor for them, and it made sense how quickly he'd managed to catch up.

Indeed, what had seemed like him giving up the ruse... was really just Thomas learning the things he needed to learn swiftly enough to no longer have to lean on his memory loss as an excuse for his ignorance.

Her mouth opens and closes as Camilla tries to find the words. If Thomas is telling her the truth now... and she's starting to think he is, then she owes him an apology. After all, the way she'd treated him when he was blindly grasping for information and confused and lost about who he was and where they were going... it was not exactly knightly.

She'd even threatened his life and accused him of having ill intentions towards poor Eloise! Fuck, she was such a bitch!

But... part of her still can't fully accept it. Call it what you will, misplaced pride maybe, but she still finds herself hesitating.

"If... if what you say is true, I owe you a proper apology for my dishonorable conduct Lord Thomas. If you will permit it though... I would like to see this journal with my own two eyes before I tender said apology."

If he refused, then it proved he was just lying again, after all. That was the only way out of this Camilla saw without taking a devastating blow to her pride and honor, a way out that was narrowing by the second.

... A way out that seems to almost slam shut in her face when Thomas just shrugs nonchalantly and nods.

"Sure, you can read it. You don't have to apologize though either way. I get it, honestly. Like I said, the Thomas Marlow I read about in the journal was a total asshole. Even if he didn't poison his brother, he still wasn't a very nice person."

Letting out a shuddering breath, Camilla sighs and sheathes her blade.

"... You should still not be so permissible, Young Lord. Especially not when someone like me shows someone like you such disrespect. Come, let us return

to the Mayor's House so I may have my pride punctured at last by the existence of the journal... and so I might start making amends."

Thomas chuckles and shrugs again, putting his spear and shield on his back to show he's ready to depart. Together, the pair of them begin making their way back into town and towards what has become home over these past three months.

Despite being almost certain that she's definitely about to be proven a truly despicable sort of bitch, Camilla actually feels a bit lighter as they go, her steps feeling less heavy now, like a weight has been lifted from her shoulders now that she's confessed the truth to Thomas and learned what a fool she's been.

That feeling of levity, however, is abruptly ended by a sudden scream in the air coming from the west of town. Immediately, Camilla meets Thomas' eyes... and all thought of the journal is forgotten as they both burst into motion, racing towards the sound of the screaming.

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And to think, the day had been going so well too. Sure, Camilla had admitted to receiving orders to kill him, but she'd also admitted she couldn't see herself doing it. Hell, from the sound of things she was even ready to believe him about the whole amnesia thing, which would certainly be a load off of his back because it meant the final vestiges of her treating him like he was the original Thomas Marlow should fall away.

Alas, just as they were heading back so he could let her read the journal, they find themselves waylaid by screaming. Said screaming is coming from the farms on the outskirts of Last Hope, specifically the farm closest to the edge of the Darkwoods.

Unfortunately, even as fast as he and Camilla are capable of moving now... they arrive too late. Beth is already dead by the time they get there, her blood all over the ground and her body being dragged back towards the treeline by a massive, hulking Dire Wolf, easily the biggest that Thomas has ever seen.

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Fortunately, Beth isn't a human. Unfortunately, she's one of Last Hope's few dairy cows, a massive hulking creature that had supplied milk to the town for her entire life. And now she's dead, her cow head hanging at an odd angle, her neck clearly snapped by the ferocious jaws that even now tug her across the ground away from the farm.

The farmer and his wife and children are all fine, thankfully. Not a single one of them has been hurt. But the farmer's wife is still screaming like a banshee, shouting obscenities in the Dire Wolf's direction for killing poor Beth like it had.

Thomas shares a look and nod with Camilla and they both prepare to charge in. Sure, they might be too late to save Beth, but that was no reason not to kill the Dire Wolf and retrieve the cow carcass for processing by the farmer who owned it.

It was how you dealt with pests like this Dire Wolf, who was clearly only here because they'd cleared out the goblins and left nothing between the wolves and the edge of the Darkwoods. Kill it and maybe the next ones would reconsider approaching Last Hope.

The only problem is... Thomas and Camilla both only manage to take one step before a massive, rumbling sound akin to a growl erupts from the treeline in front of them. It doesn't come from the Dire Wolf dragging Beth's body back into the trees, however. No... it comes from something else entirely.

Pushing a snout bigger than Thomas ever could have imagined out of the treeline, a Dire Wolf that has to be the size of a fucking Elephant makes his presence known. Massive glowing red eyes glare at Thomas and Camilla and the other humans of the farm and huge, hulking fangs are bared, dripping with saliva and the promise of violence.

All around it, other pairs of glowing red eyes appear as dozens of Dire Wolves just within the Darkwoods make their presence known as well. But honestly,

Thomas only has eyes for the biggest one. Because it's not just his size... its his sheer presence.

In that moment, for the first time since arriving in this world, Thomas is so frozen in fear that he can't even make his legs move. And worse still, out of the corner of his eye, he sees that Camilla is much the same way, frozen in place.

Its one thing for him to be caught up in the massive monster's sheer aura. But for Camilla to be in the exact same state tells Thomas one thing and one thing only... this thing in front of them is the sort of thing that could wipe Last Hope completely off the map if it wanted to...

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A/N: Ruh roh.

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!