

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

A/N: In this chapter, Thomas goes all in.

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“No. I would be happy to have you accompany me into the Darkwoods, Dame Camilla.”

He doesn't really have another choice at this point. Proving himself a coward by refusing to enter the dark scary forest with a woman who may or may not be under orders to kill him... just wasn't an option. In the end, Thomas had to man up and they would see what happened.

Of course, his words definitely surprise Camilla, who looks taken aback for a moment before narrowing her eyes.

“Fine. Let us be off.”

Clearly, she thinks she's calling his bluff. Only, it's not a bluff. Thomas leads Camilla back through town, the red head following in his wake. They stop at the Mayor's House for a moment so he can retrieve his actual spear and set the training spear down in its place. If he's going to enter a monster-infested forest, he's not going to do so with a blunted weapon.

From there, with spear in hand and his heart in his throat, they both make their way to the Apothecary's Hut... which just so happens to be on the edge of Last Hope, one of the closest buildings to the Darkwoods. Arnold is in of course, the aging Apothecary not really having anywhere else to be. He seems surprised to see them... and then pleased when Thomas explains exactly what they're going to be doing.

Word of the ease with which Camilla had dispatched the goblin raid three days prior had of course reached Arnold's ears, just as it had the entire town at this

point. That's probably why the old man writes out a list of ingredients, their descriptions, and where to look for them that's as long as one of Thomas' legs.

When they'd originally talked about the potions Arnold could no longer personally procure ingredients for, it had definitely not been anything close to this amount... but Thomas couldn't really blame the Apothecary for taking advantage of what he likely saw as an opportunity that he and Last Hope couldn't afford to pass up.

After getting the instructions from Arnold and rolling up the parchment into a tight scroll, it's finally time. Thomas finds himself staring into the dark, foreboding woods as he and Camilla stand on the forest's edge, wondering if he's about to meet his death on this very day.

Beside him, Camilla snorts derisively.

"We can still turn back, Young Lord. I can see you sweating, you know. You're practically shaking in your boots."

She's not wrong... she's just wrong about what's causing his fear. This was not how Thomas intended to conquer the very specific phobia he'd developed regarding being 'disposed of' by his would be knightly bodyguard, but it seems he has no choice anymore. That said... he can't help but verbally spar with her. It's not like she'll do any other kind of sparring with him, after all.

"Tell me Dame Camilla... before this assignment, did we know each other particularly well? Did we ever even exchange a single word with one another?"

It's a total shot in the dark, admittedly. A gamble that Thomas has been keeping in his back pocket for a bit now. And yet... it could also be considered an educated guess. After all, he got the impression from all of her comments that Camilla's distaste and disdain for him wasn't actually all that personal. Rather, it was more... generalized. Or to put it another way, she'd taken on her dislike for him from another source, almost like she was championing someone else's cause.

It's a guess... but as he looks at Camilla out of the corner of his eye and sees the way she stiffens while her nostrils flare, Thomas is pretty sure he's hit the nail right on the head.

"... You know full well that we did not."

Thomas smiles a sad smile at the pointed reminder of his 'amnesiac act' that he was supposed to have 'dropped'. In truth, he hadn't dropped anything... he'd just learned enough to no longer have to ask stupid questions every five minutes.

Still... shaking his head, he turns to face her fully.

"You have been told what to think of me. You have been told how to feel about me. But you don't know the real me at all. Every terrible thing you would lay at my feet, I am innocent of. Every crime you would pin to me; I carry no guilt for. I am not the man that you disdain, Dame Camilla. Consider thinking for yourself for once."

Shock, followed by outrage, quickly spreads across the red head's face... but Thomas continues on before she can get going, cutting her off.

"Do it later though if you please. For now, we have some herbs to collect. Some come on, let's get to work. Watch my back so that I can help the people of Last Hope. It's what you're good for, after all."

Is it smart to be antagonizing a woman who could cut him down before he could even blink? Probably not. But at this point, Thomas doesn't care. As he turns back around and takes his first steps into the shadows of the Darkwoods, he's already found his conviction. Either he dies in these woods... or he'll make it out alive having proven something to both Camilla AND himself.

There can be no inbetween.

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As she follows her charge into the Darkwoods, Dame Camilla Ackinworth, Knight Bachelorette of the Order of Saints, has never felt more conflicted or uncertain before. And that's a very bad thing, because a knight is not supposed to be indecisive. A knight is not supposed to be unsure of herself.

Indecision, uncertainty, and conflict were all death to a Knight Bachelorette. Going into battle without full confidence in not just your abilities but also your righteousness was a sure way of losing said battle before it had even begun.

For the longest time, Dame Camilla had been certain of herself and her purpose, confident that she was on the right path. Inheriting the Gift of Swordsmanship from her father had set her on that path from a very early age... she'd learned to fight with a sword before she'd learned how to hold a quill and write with a pen.

Her martial prowess was not in question. Her skills with the blade were not in question. However... however, the righteousness of her current cause, her 'assignment' as the Young Lord Marlow had put it... that was in question. It had been in question for her for quite some time now.

Thomas Marlow was not like he was supposed to be. Camilla had long heard the tales of the boy over the years. Being accepted into the service of House Marlow as a girl had been one of the greatest moments of her life. Everyone knew that the Noble House was one of the most moral and righteous in the Capital, after all.

House Marlow did not engage in the sort of things that lesser nobles did. They did not deal in subterfuge or skullduggery or backroom politics. They did not backstab their allies, nor did they attempt to trick and trip up their adversaries.

They were honorable in a way so few Noble Houses could claim to be these days. And that made them worthier than most of a Knight Bachelorette's service.

Unfortunately, while all of this was true when she'd first sworn service to them, it became less true as their second son grew into his own and became the black sheep of the family. As Thomas Marlow grew up, Camilla heard story after story

of the boy's actions and how poorly they reflected on the otherwise sterling reputation of his House.

He was nothing like his older brother, Martin Marlow. That was a young man who everyone sung the praises of, both servants and nobles alike. He was courteous, well-studied, and generally regarded as the perfect heir, a suitable man to one day replace his father as Head of House Marlow.

By comparison, Thomas couldn't go a week without getting into some kind of trouble. Camilla heard all about it over and over again, the things he would get caught doing, the punishments that were doled out with ever increasing frequency for his actions.

She'd never had any reason to doubt what she'd been told. They weren't exactly rumors; they were all but confirmed by multiple sources to have happened the way that she was told they happened. Thomas Marlow and his actions were well documented and if there was any serious doubt that he'd done the things he'd done, she's certain his parents wouldn't have punished him the way they did.

No, she'd never had any reason to doubt... until now. Because ever since she'd been given this assignment by Lady Marlow herself, things had felt... strange.

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"Come in, Camilla. I would ask you to sit, but I think you'd prefer to stand."

"Yes Lady Marlow, I'm fine like this."

"Very well. Be at ease at least. I only wished to speak with you before you left tomorrow morning."

"Understood."

"... First, I wanted to apologize. This is not an honorable assignment. There is no glory to be had here in escorting that... boy."

"There is no need to apologize, Lady Marlow. I serve at the behest of your House. You tell me where to go and what to do. The honor comes from serving with distinction, the pride comes from using my hard-earned skills to help you and your House in whatever way you need. Including like this."

"Mm. Yes, I see. That is... a good way of looking at things. Even still, we cannot lose you forever, Dame. You are too important to the House to be wasted on such a... dead end duty for long."

"My Lady?"

"That boy has earned his last punishment. Poisoning his brother... the physicians say that Martin may never wake. Unfortunately, there is no proper evidence of the boy's crimes. No proof ties him to this, even though we know it was him."

...

"I'm sure the boy will make a nuisance of himself once in Last Hope. You have my permission to ensure that he does not terrorize the locals overly much. With any luck, he will eventually take care of himself, perhaps by trying to escape into the Rotlands or the Darkwoods. However, if he does not... then I am not adverse to you hurrying things along."

"I... I'm afraid I do not fully understand, Lady Marlow."

"Of course. You are an honorable knight, Dame Ackinworth. Still, even the most honorable knight slays monsters, no? And what greater monster is there than one who would poison his own kin?"

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"I'm not saying to do it right away. Wait a few months at least... three should be enough. If he hasn't dealt with himself by then... you have my permission to ensure your safe return to us. A safe return that can only be facilitated if your current assignment comes to a decisive end. Am I understood?"

“... Yes, *Lady Harlow*.”

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That conversation alone had been bad enough. Never before had a member of House Marlow asked such a thing of her. Something that... stretched her honor as a knight, if it did not break it outright. There was certainly no honor to be had in killing a weakling like Thomas Marlow. Then again, there'd similarly been no honor in slaughtering the goblins who threatened Last Hope, but she'd done that anyways... because some things needed doing.

If she was being charitable, then that was what Lady Marlow had meant. Comparing her own son to a monster was not so outrageous when one considered that she believed him to have poisoned his brother, her other son.

And yet... and yet, DID Camilla still believe that? Because that conversation with Lady Marlow had not been the end of the strangeness surrounding this assignment.

First, there was how Thomas Marlow acted in the carriage. He'd been sullen and withdrawn at first, not daring to meet her eye or exchange a word with her. Then, he'd slowly toppled over, falling asleep right there on the bench across from her. At one point, it even looked like he'd stopped breathing, so deep he was able to sleep.

Then he woke up again... and suddenly it was like he was a completely different person. He acted confused and baffled by both her attitude and his circumstances, pretending like he didn't know who she was or where they were or what was going on.

The whole 'memory loss' act was something she'd been prepared for, however. What Camilla was not prepared for was how he'd acted next. First with Eloise and then with the rest of Last Hope as well, Thomas Marlow had become the embodiment of just one word: Generous.

At first, she'd thought he was trying to woo Eloise the conventional way after her threat outside of the bedroom holding the poor girl's father. But it was one thing to help out the Mayor's Daughter and try and show off to her. It was another entirely to do the things Thomas had been doing.

Going around town, throwing himself into menial labor after menial labor, doing any task put before him and begging for more work when there was nothing left... it just didn't make sense. He was constantly moving, constantly working, constantly pushing himself past his limits to the point of exhaustion.

It would be one thing if he was schmoozing and networking and shirking any actual work while trying to get close to the townsfolk at the same time. That would line up perfectly with all the stories that she'd been told about him and his activities back in the Capital.

However, that simply wasn't anywhere close to what he was actually doing. The young man was literally working himself to death... falling to his bed and sleeping like a stone each and every night, only to wake up the next day and do it all over again.

Frankly, he should have been too exhausted to even think about demanding weapons training from her. Coming to her like this in leather armor and wielding a spear made by the townsfolk... it was just baffling.

Something had changed about Thomas Marlow and Camilla didn't know what it was. She did know, however, that she couldn't carry out Lady Marlow's orders this early. And frankly... she still wasn't sure if she would be able to ever carry them out.

It really would be better if Thomas died here in these woods, or from running off into the Rotlands. But so long as Camilla was at his side, her honor as a knight refused to let anything happen to him.

... So then maybe training him so that he could do these little expeditions on his own was the right call. Only, she's not sure that training him for the express

purpose of helping him get himself killed was any more honorable than doing the deed herself.

Fuck. This indecisiveness was going to be the death of her if she wasn't careful...

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A/N: The first alternate POV of the fic. Definitely curious to hear what people think of Camilla after finally getting a look inside her head. Still hate her for now? Or do we think there's something redeemable there after all?

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!