

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

A/N: A moment to breathe, perhaps?

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There are no further attempts to try and apprehend Thomas or his girls for the rest of the night at least. Even into the next morning they aren't disturbed as the Inn provides them with an exemplary breakfast that Thomas positively devours.

Of course, by the time they're all done eating, he finds himself almost wishing that someone else *would* have bothered them by this point... because he really doesn't know what to do with himself now. As far as he's been told, he can't just walk up to the Palace and demand to speak with the King or anything like that. The Royal Bank really is the best way to get that audience, which means he has to be patient and wait for them to come through on their end.

But likewise, he can't just give into his impulse to march on over to House Godman's Capital Estate and ransack the place either. As tempting as the idea of doing so was and as satisfying as returning what they'd done to House Marlow might be... it would only cause more problems in the long run.

Frankly, he almost wishes he'd let the men from last night take him to Lord Godman so they could settle this directly. But he doubts they would have let him go before the other man armed and Thomas wasn't in the business of letting himself be rendered helpless by his enemies.

All of this was to say though... he really doesn't know what to do with himself. They've made it to the Capital, they've discovered the fate of House Marlow, and they've gotten the ball rolling on a meeting with the King. But beyond that...

"I guess... we should train some more?"

That was the default in the end. Even when they were on the road after leaving Last Hope, he had taken every opportunity to train with Camilla and Sevv. Fighting was... well, it was the easiest way to improve thanks to his Gift.

At his words, Camilla and Sevv both perk up. Thomas grins, having expected them to be interested. Even Eloise smiles fondly, used to the three of them being battle maniacs by this point. There's just one issue, really...

"Where can we go for that though?"

Camilla immediately raises her hand.

"The Citadel, Lord Thomas. Tis the headquarters for my Knightly Order and has a rather large training yard that actually encompasses the entire outer ring. We will be able to find space there thanks to my affiliation."

Thomas smiles.

"Excellent, then let's finish up here and head over, shall we?"

There are no complaints in that regard, so within the next ten minutes they're stepping out of the inn and onto the street. Armed and armored still, he knows he doesn't look much like a nobleman right now... but that's perfectly fine by him because he's not exactly trying to do noble things at the moment.

That said, for as nice as this part of the city is, Thomas is still half-expecting to be accosted again the moment they step outside. And yet... he doesn't see anyone who looks like they're waiting to interrupt him and his girls.

That doesn't mean their departure goes unnoticed though. Thomas definitely clocks at least one person spying on them as Camilla turns them in a certain direction and begins leading them towards her Order's Capital Headquarters. He's not really surprised that someone, probably multiple someones, are keeping tabs on them though. It is what it is.

Following after Camilla, they make good time over to the Citadel, which true to it's name, is quite the impressive fortification. From what Thomas has seen so far, the only structure in the city bigger is the Palace itself off in the distance. The Citadel looks more fortified however, like it was a fortress made for battle rather than a monument to wealth and royalty.

They're let in through the gates easily enough though as soon as Camilla proves her identity. Her title as Knight Bachelorette sees them past the guards with ease, nobody seeming to bat an eye this time around, unlike yesterday at the City Gates.

Once inside, they arrive in a large stretch of green that seems to wind around the Citadel's main building in the center of the property. There are already dozens of people using the huge donut-shaped training yard from what Thomas can see, so he allows Camilla to lead them along the edge until they find a stretch of land that nobody is currently in.

Finally, Thomas pulls his halberd from his back and rolls his shoulders, limbering up a bit as Camilla does the same. Seevi, meanwhile, looks hesitant, frowning slightly as she glances down at her maid attire. She hadn't changed into her armor, nor had Thomas asked her to... he knew she was armed though all the same. And yet, if she sparred with them like usual, then it was likely she would ruin her uniform with sweat from the exertion.

"It's alright, Seevi. Maybe later. For now... Camilla and I will have a fight."

Seevi pouts, even as Camilla freezes. Interestingly enough, it's not the former who points out the obvious... it's Camilla herself.

"... My lord will not improve from just fighting me alone..."

Thomas just chuckles and shakes his head, letting a carefree grin spread across his face.

"That's fine. I'll improve in another way all the same. In the meantime, you'll improve... and that's what matters to me."

Camilla's face almost goes as red as her hair as she parses what Thomas' is saying. Yes, he might not personally grow stronger just from fighting her at this point, but he did gain further skill in teaching and training others whenever they had one on one sessions together. And more than that, Camilla tended to improve by leaps and bounds whenever they sparred these days, a direct result of his skill as a teacher becoming greater and greater.

To put it simply... they would all get something out of this, even if Thomas himself might not become faster, stronger, or tougher from sparring with Camilla.

In the end, the red headed knight merely nods and prepares herself. Thomas does the same, the two of them squaring off in the training yard for a moment of silence where both remain still. Until finally, at some unspoken signal... they both launch forward.

What follows is exactly as productive as Thomas knew it would be. Yes, Camilla by herself doesn't hold a candle to him at this point, but that's like comparing a candle to a bonfire. It's not fair. However, she still struggles with all her might, giving as good as she can. Thomas leads her through the spar as well, a much better teacher than she was back in their early days training together.

In the end, it's not either of them who calls an end to things... they're both having much too fun with this particular martial dance. Instead, a voice calls out, causing them to break off from one another and focus back on the outside world.

"Well now! THAT was an interesting sight!"

Thomas blinks as he realizes he allowed himself to get so distracted fighting Camilla that he hadn't realized they'd gathered an audience. Judging by the look of surprise on Camilla's face, it was the same for her.

To their credit, the onlookers have mostly maintained a respectful distance. But there's no denying that their fighting has drawn the attention of others using the training yard. And standing much closer than most, about the same distance

away from them as Eloise and Sevvie are, is an armored man with a big grin on his face.

“S-Sir Alonses... well met.”

Camilla’s response is met with a simple nod from the now identified Sir Alonses. So this was the knight that Camilla had told him about yesterday evening.

“Dame Camilla, good to see you again so soon. Though I must admit, this is the last place I expected you to bring your lord...”

Sir Alonses looks over at Thomas curiously, an assessing glint in his eye before he bows his head again.

“Lord Thomas Marlow I presume. You’re not what I thought you would be.”

An interesting way of putting it. On the one hand, the Knight was at least willing to call Thomas ‘Lord’, unlike those House Godman men from last night. On the other hand, there’s the faintest note of derision in Sir Alonses’ voice... making it clear that the original Thomas’ reputation is preceding him.

“Lord Thomas is a capable warrior, Sir Alonses! He worked quite hard to better himself during our time at Last Hope!”

Thomas stays quiet as Camilla comes to his defense. He waits to see how this acquaintance of hers will respond. In the end, Sir Alonses eyes them both up and down before humming after a moment.

“I see that.”

Then, he offers Thomas a crooked smile.

“Care for a spar, Lord Marlow?”

Camilla straightens up but Thomas speaks before she can protest.

“Sure, we can spar.”

Out of the corner of his eye, he sees a ripple of surprise from the more distant onlookers. Even Sir Alonses looks caught off guard by how easily Thomas agrees. Meanwhile, Thomas shoots Camilla a simple look telling her not to interfere. The red head flushes but ducks her head and backs off, retiring the field to allow her fellow Knight to take her place.

As Alonses does so, he looks at Thomas with even more curiosity than before.

“You know... I was quite disappointed when I first heard Dame Camilla was being sent to Last Hope with you. It felt like a waste of her talents.”

Over where she's taken up a spot next to Eloise and Sevvii, Camilla chokes on her own spit. Thomas just chuckles though.

“It was at the start. By the end... she found plenty to occupy her time and to strain her skills to an all new level.”

That gets a narrow eyed look from the Knight across from him. Thomas just smirks in response and arches a brow.

“Shall we begin?”

Rather than respond with words, Alonses bursts into action, blurring across the clearing to strike at Thomas before he can react. Or rather... Thomas expects that's what the Knight thinks it looks like from his end.

Here's the thing... neither Thomas nor Camilla had truly been giving the previous spar their all. It simply wasn't prudent to go all out, so that was far from *either* of their fastest speeds or greatest strength. Perhaps that's why Alonses thinks he can put Thomas in his place or whatever this little dick measuring contest is supposed to be. Maybe he's just trying to express his displeasure at Camilla being sent to Last Hope... that's perhaps the most charitable interpretation of the other man's actions that Thomas can find.

Either way, as fast as Alonses is moving, as speedily as he swings at Thomas... it's just so unbelievably slow to Thomas' senses. And in the end... it's almost painfully easy for Thomas to simply slip aside, dodging Alonses' blow with ease.

The Knight swings through the location where Thomas previously was, stumbling forward a couple steps. To his credit though, he otherwise recovers quite rapidly, spinning back around with wide eyes but also a determined look on his face as he comes after Thomas again.

This Sir Alonses seems to be very used to overwhelmingly dominating whatever battlefield he finds himself on, because he comes at Thomas like a rushing bull, huffing and puffing and clearly expecting Thomas to falter and either break or fall in the process.

But... he's just not that fast. Or strong. Or tough. Thomas ducks, dodges, and weaves. And when he finally blocks, he can actually see Alonses' arms shaking as he tries and fails to overwhelm the relatively small amount of strength he puts into the move. Ultimately, as Thomas finally responds... the result is predictable.

He smacks the flat of his blade along the side of the other knight's leg and it immediately buckles, Sir Alonses dropping to one knee instantly as a cry of pain splits the air. He hasn't done any real damage, nothing permanent at least, but...

"Hm. Camilla! Swap with me!"

"Wha-?"

Alonses lifts his head and Thomas gives him a pitying smile, even as Camilla moves forward with a frown on her face.

"I don't think we're a good match up, Sir Alonses. You would be better off sparring with Camilla here."

He's telling the truth... to a certain extent. They aren't a good match up, mostly on account of Sir Alonses not being nearly fast or strong enough to keep up with

Thomas. He wouldn't even be a match for the King of the Forest and Thomas has long left that monster behind him in the rearview mirror.

But truth be told, Alonses wouldn't be any better off sparring with Camilla. However... Camilla might be better off after sparring with Alonses. The red head had told him about this man yesterday after they'd made it to the Inn, after all. She'd told him about how Alonses had shown up while he and Eloise were in the Royal Bank and she'd explained their history with one another.

Privately, Thomas agreed entirely with Sevv... it didn't matter that Camilla had never beaten the other knight in the past. That was before Last Hope and everything that transpired there.

Pushing himself back to his feet, Sir Alonses shakes the feeling back into his leg, his eyes narrowing as he realizes that Thomas hadn't actually dealt him any sort of serious injury... twas more of a love tap than anything. The male knight stares at Camilla, even as she stands across from him at the ready.

"Heh. Alright then. Just like old times, eh Camilla?"

Camilla doesn't respond, trembling a bit. It's clear that she's nervous... and likely remembering every time in the past that the man across from her has bested her.

This time will be different though. Thomas knows it will be. He moves to stand with Sevv and Eloise and grins a little bit. He can hardly wait.

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A/N: Getting a good show of how Thomas and his gals measure up against those in the Capital here~

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!

