

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

A/N: Poor Camilla...

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Slowly, Camilla climbs down from the wagon, taking an unsteady step in the direction of what had once been House Marlow's Capital Estate. On her second, her legs give out from under her and she collapses to her knees. Distantly, she thinks she hears her Lord call out her name in a concerned tone, but truth be told... she's too focused on what's in front of her to truly register his voice.

She'd told herself to expect the worst of course. For the tome she'd been given to disintegrate in her hands, something terrible must have happened to the Master Tome. And that, combined with what Lord Godman's dying words, made it clear that House Marlow's enemies had moved against them.

Camilla had even told herself that it shouldn't matter to her too much. After all, she'd set aside her loyalty to the Noble House *months* ago, choosing instead to only remain loyal to Thomas Marlow and him alone. So long as he didn't care what became of the House that had banished him to the ass end of nowhere, Camilla shouldn't have cared either.

... Except she'd had friends and acquaintances among the Estate Staff. Some of her fellow knights, people she'd known for years, had served under House Marlow as well. Her time in service to the Lord and Lady Marlow had been dutiful and filled with responsibilities certainly, but that didn't mean she hadn't made any meaningful connections with people.

Those people had lived on this property. They'd maintained this property, from seeing to its defenses to serving the Lord and Lady and their sons, to everything else in between. And now... now the property was reduced to naught but ash.

"Camilla..."

Lord Thomas' hands are on her shoulders and Camilla finds his touch to be grounding in a way. He's gotten down from the wagon and come to crouch at her side, holding her firmly. Only because of that is she able to tear her gaze off of the devastation in front of her and turn to him.

He should be displeased with her. She's supposed to be his knight after all, and knights do not show weakness in public... certainly not when they're meant to be guarding their lords. And yet, there is no recrimination or judgment in his eyes.

There's only concern... concern for her, because Thomas has no memories of this place or the people who had lived here. So any heartache he would feel would be purely in the abstract sense. A tragedy had happened here, but for him it had happened to strangers.

Camilla swallows hard and forces herself to focus. She climbs back to her feet with minimal help from Thomas himself and turns her back on the ruins of House Marlow's Capital Estate.

"Apologies my lord. My behavior is unbecoming of a knight."

Thomas grimaces, looking like he wants to defend her from herself... but in the end, he just shakes his head.

"Think nothing of it. Let's just focus on our next steps. We need to find out what happened here, first and foremost... I suppose we'll have to ask around."

With that, Thomas begins to look up and down the street. This far into the High District, the estates get larger and larger as the mansions get older and more grandiose. If you continued going down this road, in fact, you would eventually arrive at the Palace overlooking the Capital from the highest point of the hill... though admittedly the main road also went all the way to the Palace as well.

The result of the estates in this part of the High District being so vast though, is that there's not really anyone close by or traveling along the walkways. Those who would travel up and down this street would only do so via carriage, most of

the time. The stretch of road in front of the ruins of House Marlow's estate is especially empty and dead, almost like nobody wants to even get close to it at this point.

In the end, Lord Thomas grimaces and shakes his head.

"We're clearly not going to get answers here, not without knocking on doors... and I suspect the neighbors in these parts aren't very neighborly. We'll have to go with Plan B."

Camilla slowly nods... her lord is right. Trying to get answers from any of the other nobles neighboring the ruins is likely to be an exercise in futility. Especially seeing as the destruction ends pointedly at the edge of House Marlow's property. Its oddly contained within only the estate itself, not managing to touch any of the neighboring properties from the look of things.

Still, Lord Thomas had come up with various plans with the help of her and the others as they'd made their way from Last Hope to the Capital. Plan B was the first of them, the plan they were to enact in the event that they could not get in contact with House Marlow upon entering the city.

Namely, it meant going to the Royal Bank, where House Marlow should have accounts and a manager for said accounts. No matter how bad the destruction was, the Royal Bank's accounts should be untouched and the Royal Bank, notoriously impartial and unbiased in its dealings, would give them the honest truth about the situation at hand.

Though... Camilla had to admit to no small amount of trepidation, even as she climbs back up into the front of the wagon and Thomas rejoins Eloise and Sevi in the back. How could this have happened? How could a Noble House with as ancient and storied a history as House Marlow seemingly be wiped out overnight, even by the machinations of House Godman?

Specifically... why had the Palace not done anything to stop it? Why were there not Royal Investigators looking over the ruins and trying to get to the bottom of

things? Was the King truly just going to let this happen... was he *involved* in it somehow?

Camilla bites her tongue as she turns the wagon around and gets them out of the High District, bringing them over to the Trade District. The Royal Bank dominates the entrance of said District, sitting on the cross-section of the main road and all the other roads that go in and out of different parts of the city.

It's a large, dark building and as they come to a stop out front of it, Camilla hesitates, looking to Thomas.

"How do you want to do this, my lord?"

Lord Thomas frowns... likely recognizing the same issue she has. Namely, who does he bring inside and who does he leave to guard their things? Normally it would be sensible to just leave her and one of his servants, while the other accompanied him in. On the other hand, Camilla is the only one with any experience regarding the Royal Bank, though admittedly it's quite limited experience.

If he runs into any trouble in there, he might need her assistance. However, if they leave Eloise and Sevvie alone with the wagon out here, it's almost certain they'll be accosted.

Finally, Thomas just shakes his head.

"Eloise will come with me. You and Sevvie will stay here with our things."

Camilla merely inclines her head in acknowledgment of his decision. She'd told him everything she knew to be fair, drilling him day after day for weeks now as they'd slowly made their way to the Capital. So by all rights, he should be fine in there... and if he wasn't, she could only hope he would manage to figure things out without her.

As he and Eloise dismount from the wagon, Camilla slumps back a little bit, unable to keep herself fully upright like she should. The destruction of the estate

continues to flash through her mind. Surely some had survived it... right? She had to believe that... no matter how terrible the destruction, someone might have lived to tell the tale...

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Thomas enters the Royal Bank feeling like an imposter. His clothing marks him as a noble, someone who should be allowed in as nice a place as this. Eloise follows dutifully behind him, slightly to his left and quiet as a mouse, signaling that he's important enough to have a personal servant.

And yet... he knows deep down that he's not the real Thomas Marlow. And seeing the original's home completely destroyed like that has only served to drive that point home. Still... he can't afford to show weakness here. Not when his girls are counting on him to project strength.

Striding across the floor of the Royal Bank, Thomas can feel some eyes on him and Eloise as he makes his way over to the section reserved specifically for nobility and walks right up to a man sitting behind a well-appointed desk.

The Bank Teller looks up at him from behind spectacles and blinks.

"How may I help you, Lord..."

Imperious. Remember, you have to be imperious.

"I am Lord Thomas Marlow. I have just arrived back in the city and discovered the state of my family's home. Call for Bank Manager Weatherby... I would hear his personal account of what has happened in my absence."

The teller's eyes had widened the moment he dropped his name, a similar reaction to what they'd gotten from the guards at the gate. By the time he's done talking, the man behind the desk looks incredibly uncertain.

"I... I shall see if he is available, Lord Marlow."

With that, he scrambles to his feet and scurries away. Thomas watches him go for a moment before imperiously sweeping his gaze across the rest of the bank. Some of the people staring at him quickly look away as his eyes find them... but some of them don't. Some keep staring, even as he stares right back, seeming to be assessing him in some way.

The ensuing awkward silence stretches on for a couple of minutes before it's finally broken by the arrival of the man Thomas is waiting for.

"Lord Marlow! To see you hale and healthy after your family's tragedy... truly spectacular!"

The first impression that Thomas gets of his family's bank manager... is slimy. The smile on Weatherby's face doesn't feel even slightly genuine. No, it's way too slippery, and Thomas can positively feel the self-serving nature of the man from here. But... he *is* a banker after all, and more than that, Camilla had assured him that the Royal Bank had a reputation of neutrality to maintain.

Still, the mention of tragedy... it would seem Thomas had at least come to the right place for answers. Fully focusing his attention on the Bank Manager and pointedly ignoring everyone else watching on, Thomas nods sharply.

"Let's continue this conversation in your office then."

Weatherby's broad smile freezes a little at that, his entire body shifting for a moment as he seems to consider Thomas.

"... Yes, right this way."

And then, like nothing has happened, he turns to the side and gestures for Thomas to follow him, before leading the way into the back of the Bank. Shortly after, they arrive at an office, with Weatherby ushering him and Eloise inside and then closing the door behind them.

As soon as he's seated behind his desk, the man drops his smile and turns solemn... though the latter expression is no more genuine than the former, Thomas can tell.

"I was so, so sorry to hear about what happened to House Marlow, Lord Thomas. But I'm glad to see that you, at least, still live."

Well, if that wasn't extremely ominous... still, Thomas wasn't in the mood to beat around the bush. He strides up to the man's desk and pins him with a gaze that causes Weatherby to freeze up again, his eyes widening and his pupils shrinking.

"What exactly did happen? As I told your man, I have only just arrived back in the city. I have been to see the Marlow Estate and know it to be in ruins. But other than that, I do not know any of what has befallen my family."

It felt strange to refer to them as 'his family', but he had to play the role at this point. He couldn't afford to have anyone questioning his legitimacy.

"You... you truly don't know? Then what brought you back to the Capital?"

Fortunately, he and Camilla had come up with a reasonable explanation. According to her, it was highly unlikely that anyone outside of Lord and Lady Marlow would know that Camilla had been the one given the communication tome and not him. It should have been him after all, if not for the circumstances surrounding his exile.

"The tome I was given to send regular reports back to my family. It disintegrated on me, signaling the destruction of the Master Tome back at the estate. I rushed to return the moment that happened."

Well, not the moment that happened. It had been three weeks since then, one to settle affairs in Last Hope and two to travel by wagon along the road... perhaps they should have moved faster. If he'd dropped the wagon and carried Eloise on his back, they probably could have made it to the Capital within a few days.

However, it would have made it far more difficult to bring their supplies along... to say nothing of what it would have looked like to the people of the towns they stopped in along the way.

Regardless, Thomas doesn't say any of that to Weatherby... he just stares the Banker down, waiting to hear what he already suspects is the case.

In turn, Weatherby looks stricken for a moment... before letting out a weary sigh.

"My sincerest condolences then, my lord. A few weeks back... the entirety of the Marlow Estate went up in a blaze. It was aflame within minutes and once it got burning, there was no stopping it. According to what the Royal Bank has been told, all members of House Marlow save yourself were inside... there were no survivors."

From what he knew, the members of House Marlow were just him, his comatose brother, and their parents at this point anyways. So it wasn't surprising that everyone except for him was in the estate. However, for them to have not been able to get away... for nobody to have been able to get away from the sound of things... that smacked of foul play, didn't it?

Of course, Thomas already knew House Godman was behind the destruction. But did everyone else?

"Who did this? Who was responsible for this treachery?"

There's the barest flicker of something in Weatherby's eyes as the Bank Manager clasps his hands in front of him and shakes his head solemnly.

"I'm afraid the Royal Investigators have ruled it to be a truly tragic accident, my lord."

Ridiculous. Utterly ridiculous. And the man across from him clearly knew it too...

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A/N: I'm sure the totality of the death and destruction isn't too surprising, but hopefully the potential scope of the betrayal is enough to wet appetites~

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!