

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

A/N: Everyone will get their day in court~

-x-X-x-

Time was not on their side. The moment they'd succeeded at exfiltrating from the Godman Estate without sounding the alarm, they had effectively given themselves a very real time limit... and one that might have already expired, truth be told.

After all, if Solomon Godman was to check his safe at any point, he would quickly realize the theft that had taken place and know that someone had stolen damning evidence of his crimes. If he were to wonder where Graelo had gone, that too would set off alarm bells in his head as he was left questioning whether something had happened to his Dark Elf conspirator.

All in all, they were on a time crunch... but fortunately, both the King and his Spymaster had agreed with Thomas on that assessment. After he and Sevvie had returned to the city and made their way back to the Palace, they'd met with the two men in the King's study again. From there, they'd outlined everything they'd discovered.

Qyvern had demanded that Sevvie translate every letter so he could write down their contents in the human tongue, something she'd done after a nod from Thomas. At the same time, both the Spymaster and the King had looked at the communication orb with a sense of weariness, especially after it was described how easy it was to use... and how a call might come in at any time.

Fortunately, the communication orb did not start buzzing with an incoming call at any point during that nightly conversation. And once all was said and done and the letters were translated in full, King Ashwood and Spymaster Qyvern were in agreement... they had to move on it immediately.

Of course, they didn't know how often Lord Godman checked his safe. If he knew by morning that he'd been robbed, then an order for him to present himself at the Palace would likely be ignored and the man himself would either flee or start making moves of his own.

They needed a way to get him to the Palace without making it clear that it was a trap for him. Even if he knew the letters and orb were stolen, he didn't know for sure that it was the King who had ordered it, after all. If he thought it was something that Thomas had done of his own volition... or possibly ordered Sevi to do without the knowledge of the King... well, that presented an opportunity.

After all, Lord Godman had been looking for a way to destroy Thomas ever since he'd arrived in the city. So why not give him the perfect platform... by announcing Thomas' oath swearing as a great big event that the entirety of court would assemble to witness?

It was the best bait they had for a trap as well as the perfect noise to hopefully distract Lord Godman from everything else. He would have to attend the ceremony if he wanted to object to it and try to tear Thomas down. He would have to make a scene if he wanted to keep House Marlow from continuing on.

Perfect? Probably not... but it was the best they had.

And so here Thomas was, standing in fancy clothing just outside of the throne room, waiting to be announced to court. It was a late court session, deep into the afternoon... but to be fair, even if they'd been on a time crunch, there were still preparations to be made.

The King had ensured, by way of his Spymaster, that even if Lord Godman did try to flee the city, most ways should be closed to him. Loyal men were at each of the gates, and the Godman Estate was being closely watched. The city walls were now there to keep one man in, to cage him so that he could be funneled to only one place... his reckoning.

Finally... it's time.

“Presenting Thomas Marlow, Heir to House Marlow, here to swear his oath of fealty to King Vincent Ashwood!”

The large double doors open and Thomas steps into the throne room with his back ramrod straight. A hundred pairs of eyes, probably more, all turn to stare at him... but he's not really self-conscious about that sort of thing. Instead, Thomas only has interest in finding and meeting one pair of eyes among the crowd... and there he is.

The spitting image of the portrait of himself he had in his office, Lord Solomon Godman stands among the other courtiers, his eyes narrowed into slits and his jaw clenched. His hands at his sides are curled into fists as he stares at Thomas. If the man could kill with his eyes alone, Thomas would already be dead.

Thomas, meanwhile, barely pays him any mind, instead letting his gaze slide right past the other man and back to the King upon his throne at the other end of the hall. Walking forward, Thomas makes his way over and stops a respectable distance away, before dropping to one knee and bowing his head.

“Your Majesty. I present myself to you.”

There's silence for a moment as the King observes him. Finally though...

“Thomas Marlow. As the last living member of House Marlow, the Crown recognizes you. Speak your oath and take your place as Lord of your House.”

Murmuring starts up immediately among the court. They weren't expecting this, either because they thought the King would refuse his oath because of Thomas' prior reputation or because they believed the King was in House Godman's pocket.

Regardless, Thomas opens his mouth, prepared to give his oath if nobody was going to outright interrupt. However...

“I object!”

He's cut off before he can. A shocked hush falls over the crowd as Lord Solomon Godman steps forth, entering the empty space that Thomas had just walked the length of and putting every eye on him.

Thomas lifts his head and looks back at Lord Godman, even as the King raises a brow.

"You object? On what grounds do you object, Lord Godman?"

Straightening up, dignity and poise clearly warring with anger on Solomon Godman's face, the older man points a finger at Thomas.

"This... boy is not fit to be a Lord. His father is likely rolling over in his grave at the very idea! The late Lord Marlow would sooner see his House defunct over giving it to this... reprobate!"

Oooh, such harsh words. And the fact that Lord Godman is invoking the name of the very man he'd so obviously had a hand in killing... Thomas rises to his feet, letting some very real anger leak into the act he's playing up. He bristles angrily... but lets the King speak before he can, making it seem like he's interrupting him.

"Those are strong words, Lord Godman. But what crimes, exactly, do we lay at Thomas Marlow's feet?"

A look of triumph flashes across Solomon Godman's face for just a split second before he gets himself under control. They were giving him exactly what he wanted, or so he thought. A platform... an audience...

"We all know of the boy's actions before his exile from this very city! Even his own House sent him to the ends of the Kingdom in disgrace! But let us discuss what he has done since returning, shall we? First and foremost... the massacre of House Godman guards at the inn he was staying at the night he arrived in the city! The inn's staff will tell it true... Thomas Marlow killed each and every one of those men, slaughtering them without mercy!"

Shocked gasps and cries of horror fill the crowd, many of them likely manufactured by Godman supporters... but some probably genuine as they just take the respected Lord at his word.

Fortunately, the King's Spymaster had uncovered this particular scheme ahead of time, or Thomas would have honestly been caught flat-footed by the accusation. After all, he'd left those men battered and bruised but still alive for a reason that night.

He hadn't wanted to give Lord Godman an excuse to bring the Throne down on his head before he was absolutely certain that the King was fully in House Godman's pocket. And lucky he didn't too, given how everything had worked out for them.

Still, to be willing to kill off his own men just to frame Thomas for their deaths... despicable.

"I killed nobody that night. I was accosted by your men late in the evening and told you demanded my presence. I refused. They attacked me... they were defeated quite soundly by my knight, Dame Camilla Ackinworth. She sent them all running with their tails tucked between their legs. The assertion that she or I slaughtered them is absurd."

For just a moment, Solomon Godman falters, the crowd going quiet. After all, nobody save for the King himself was expecting Thomas to be able to defend himself this well. Articulation, politics, and a steel spine... these things were not listed among the original Thomas Marlow's skill set.

To his credit though, the Lord of House Godman recovers quickly enough, scoffing in response.

"Absurd? What's more absurd? That you killed my men or that they were slain by some other force after running afoul of you?!"

Other force, hah... but Thomas doesn't have to respond because the King does it for him, his voice curious but neutral as he suddenly speaks.

“Lord Godman... why were your men at the inn that night? What reason did they have to be there, if not to procure Thomas Marlow?”

Despite the King's words being innocent in tone, despite him seemingly not taking a side either way... that very neutrality is enough to have Lord Godman stiffen up in indignation. He's so used to the King capitulating and turning a blind eye that being questioned like this seems to be an outrage to him. And yet... he has an audience. He has to continue to play to it.

“... I will admit, my men were there that night to retrieve Thomas Marlow. Indeed, they were ordered to bring him to me... because I wished to know what he had done to my SON!”

Another string of loud, somewhat theatrical gasps comes from certain places in the crowded throne room, even as Lord Godman jabs another finger at Thomas. He doesn't even have to feign his anger from what Thomas can tell... this is pure, honest rage over the disappearance of his heir. In fact... Lord Godman might have even loved Sol, beneath his otherwise vile personality.

“As shamed as I am to admit it, my son has long counted this boy as his friend! I have done my best over the years to curtail that friendship, but my son's heart was too big and he refused. I thought it done when Thomas Marlow was finally exiled from this place... but alas, my son was merely biding his time. When disaster struck House Marlow, when their estate burned down with all inside... my son took some men and made for Last Hope, intending to retrieve his friend and bring him home.”

Everyone is listening with rapt attention now. If nothing else, Lord Godman is a skilled orator. He's spinning quite the tale... a tale that he and Sol had likely discussed well in advance. The idea that Sol had left for Last Hope without his father's permission was laughable though. It was all part of the plan.

"And yet, weeks later... it is not my son who returns, but this boy! He comes here in a wagon with his retainers, no sign of my heir to be found! My men were tasked with bringing him to me so I could find out what happened to my son! For I believe that Thomas Marlow killed him... just as he orchestrated the poisoning of his brother! Just as he no doubt orchestrated the destruction of the Marlow Estate!"

Pure pandemonium. The crowded throne room erupts at this latest accusation. If the original Thomas had somehow made it to this point and was standing here today, there's no doubt in the current Thomas' mind that he would have crumbled under the pressure. While many of the nobles look shocked and confused by the accusations, plenty more are spitting mad and jabbing their fingers at Thomas, calling for his head.

It's all so... performative. Thomas stands there stoically amongst it all and lets it wash over him. After all, nobody is actually moving to do anything to him. Nobody will without the say-so of the King.

That's what eventually causes all the noise to cease. They settle down, waiting for the King's verdict... no doubt waiting for the King to side with Lord Godman and declare that Thomas is to be imprisoned or executed or something.

As things start to quiet down, however, the King doesn't speak. Instead... a side door near the throne opens and a certain someone steps through it. Before, it had been quiet... now, silence falls as all eyes turn to see Princess Anna Ashwood make her way over to the seat next to her father's throne. A seat that had been vacant for quite some time now as she'd suffered from Rot Lung. A seat that she now fills, sitting rather demurely with her hands in her lap and the softest of smiles on her beautiful face.

Thomas meets the Princess' eyes and her smile grows just a fraction of an inch, even as she gives him a very minute nod. He returns it and then turns to see Solomon Godman's reaction.

The Lord of House Godman's face is slack with shock, his eyes wide as he stares at the sight of Anna, fully healed and sitting at her father's side once more. Nobody seems to know what to do... nobody seems to know what to say.

Giving his daughter a warm smile, the King reaches over and places a hand atop one of hers, squeezing it firmly. Then, he looks back over his throne room, sweeping his imperious gaze from one end of the hall to the other. Finally, his eyes settle on one man in particular... but its not Thomas. Rather, King Ashwood stares at Lord Godman from across the hall, his gaze far from friendly.

"I find myself confused about one thing in particular, Lord Godman. Perhaps you can clear it up for me. You say your son left the Capital soon after House Marlow's tragedy. And yet... the guards at the gate have been questioned extensively on this subject. While their initial story seems to corroborate yours... they eventually changed their minds. They now claim that Sol Godman left the Capital days before the Marlow Estate burned... and that they were paid to stay quiet about it."

Leaning forward, the King arches a brow.

"Tell me... how exactly should the Crown reconcile this... discrepancy?"

As Lord Godman's face gives way to true uncertainty for the first time, Thomas' lips twitch upwards a bit more.

Hook, line, and sinker.

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A/N: All according to keikaku (keikaku means plan)~

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!