

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

A/N: Finally meeting the King.

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Was he walking into a trap? No, more than that... was he walking the others into a trap? That's the primary question and concern running through Thomas' mind even as he lets the detachment of Royal Guards escort them from the Citadel to the Palace.

Perhaps he should have been more worried about meeting with the King of all people... after all, he was supposed to be the most important man in all the Kingdom. And yet... Thomas simply couldn't bring himself to be all that trepidatious about said audience.

It wasn't talking to the King that had him fretting, it was the thought that he might not get to talk to the monarch at all, or that this audience was merely a way to trick them into walking into a potential kill box.

... If that did happen, Thomas would order Sevi to prioritize escaping with Eloise. The Dark Elf still couldn't shadow step with more than one person at a time without exhausting herself, but she should be able to at least get Eloise to safety. At which point him and Camilla would just have to fight their way out... or die trying.

The other option, that being to ambush the Royal Guards escorting them now and then flee in the aftermath without ever reaching the Palace, was something Thomas considered... but ultimately discarded. It felt reckless and impulsive and left no room for there to be a peaceable resolution to whether or not he could inherit the Lordship of House Marlow.

All in all... Thomas was taking a gamble that the corruption in the Palace *didn't* go all the way to the top. If it did, surely they wouldn't have bothered with this

song and dance... they would have just come for him and arrested him at this point.

And so Thomas and his girls walk willingly into the Palace, which he has to admit is the nicest, most grandiose structure he's seen since arriving in this world. The place is incredibly fancy and he's reminded belatedly that he's wearing his armor and wielding his halberd when their escort suddenly stops and turns back to them, the leader holding up a hand.

"You will need to disarm here. No weapons may be allowed in the presence of the King."

To be expected, Thomas supposed. In for a penny, in for a pound right? Nodding, he goes ahead and hands over his halberd while Camilla does the same with her sword. They both have a few secondary weapons as well that are also handed over to the Royal Guards.

However, Thomas pointedly doesn't look in Sevv's direction. As far as anyone should be concerned, she's just a maid right? Much like Eloise... and it's obvious that Eloise isn't a fighter. Perhaps without the presence of the Mayor's daughter, they would have been more suspicious of Sevv, but with the two maids standing side by side and Sevv perfectly mimicking Eloise's stance and demure attitude... they're passed over without a word.

Thomas doesn't sigh in relief or anything like that, even as the four of them are escorted further into the Palace from there, ostensibly heading towards the Throne Room to meet with the King. Even if he and Camilla are now unarmed, they still have their armor... and Sevv has many, many blades hidden beneath her skirts that nobody knows about.

If the worst comes to pass, then they should have a good shot at getting away still, Thomas figures. Sevv can throw them some weapons and abscond with Eloise and then they can make their own escape from there. Only... the deeper they go, the more it becomes obvious that they're not heading for the Throne Room.

Thomas may not know the layout of the Palace perfectly, but he knows enough to imagine that they would be going down much wider halls and heading towards larger double doors if they were being escorted to the Throne Room. Also they'd likely be traveling to the center of the Palace.

Instead, every step takes them into tighter, winding corridors, until Thomas really doesn't know where they are in the Palace at this point. Until finally, they arrive outside of a simple, small, nondescript door that definitely does not lead to a Throne Room. In fact, the only thing it has going for it is that two more fully armored Royal Guards are already standing outside of the door when they arrive.

Thomas stands, tense and strung as taut as piano wire, as their escorts confer with the men guarding the door for a moment. There's a pause as one of them knocks on the door and it opens so they can speak with whoever is inside.

Finally, the leader of the group who brought them here turns back to them and points.

"You and you will come in. The others will stay out here."

Thomas immediately stiffens up even further... because the Royal Guardsman has specifically singled out him and Sevvī to come in while Camilla and Eloise are to remain outside under guard. That's precisely the last sort of split that Thomas wants because it means Sevvī won't be able to grab Eloise and run.

... But he also has no good reason to say no to the command. In the end... they're in too deep to back out now.

After just a moment of hesitation, Thomas nods, his jaw clenched as he steps forward and Sevvī does the same. The two of them are let in through the open door and followed by two Royal Guards, only for the door to be closed behind them a moment later.

Thomas isn't sure what he's expecting the small room to contain. A torture chamber if he's been exceptionally foolish and too trusting, perhaps. Or maybe

just the office of some small man who isn't actually the King but rather his adviser, intending to try and intimidate Thomas into submission on House Godman's behalf.

There are a lot of different ideas like that flitting through his mind as he enters the room... but none of them come even close to the reality of what he sees. The room... is in fact a bedroom. Small, quiet, and not at all as richly appointed as other more traveled parts of the Palace, the bedroom is functional and that's about it.

There are two people in the bedroom when he, Sevv, and the guards enter. One is a young woman in the bed, clearly bedridden with sickness, while the other is an older man sat beside her... with a crown upon his brow.

King Vincent Ashwood looks up from his quiet vigil and makes eye contact with Thomas for the first time... and Thomas is struck by what he sees in the monarch's eyes. There is resignation... a deep sorrow and grief... but also a fire that he's not quite sure he was expecting. And more than that... there's a fragile hope, hidden deep behind everything else.

"Thomas Marlow."

The King is old but not decrepit. He wears his grey hair as well as he wears his crown, and his voice is deep with a certain sort of royal strength to it. Carefully letting go of the bedridden young woman's hand, he rises from his chair and turns to face Thomas properly.

Camilla has told Thomas a lot about how he's expected to act when he finally comes face to face with the King. However, every lesson that his lady knight has given him in courtly etiquette and what he's supposed to do in this moment... it involved there being an actual court surrounding the two of them and the King upon his throne looking down from atop his dais as Thomas knelt.

Doing it here in this small bedroom with such an insignificant audience... it rankled. So while it might be stupid of him, Thomas bows his head instead of taking a knee.

“... At your service, Your Majesty.”

Respectful... but not subservient. Which of course provokes an immediate negative response from one of the Royal Guards behind him.

“You little-!”

Thomas feels the other man moving to strike him for his impertinence and tenses up, ready to defend himself if need be... but it doesn't prove necessary. The King raises a hand, stopping the Guardsman in his tracks right before he would have reached Thomas and there would have been violence between them.

“Hold.”

“But... my King he-!”

“Back to your post now.”

King Ashwood manages to sound commanding and gently chiding at the same time. After half a heartbeat more, Thomas feels the Guardsman retreat from his back and relaxes a bit. When the King looks to him again, he can't quite tell if the other man knew how close Thomas came to dealing with his guard with extreme prejudice.

“You are not one of my Lords yet, are you? So you needn't kneel until you swear your oath and take up your place as Lord of House Marlow.”

Thomas tilts his head to the side.

“... By that same logic, I suppose I'm also not under your protection as my liege quite yet, Your Majesty.”

The King smiles grimly.

“No. You are not.”

There’s a pregnant, awkward pause at that... and then the King turns away again, looking back to the young woman on the bed whose side he’s just left behind.

“You are a contradiction of expectations, Thomas Marlow. All reports of your life before your exile make it clear that you were generally considered a waste of space by everyone. From your family, to your friends, to even those who sought to use you for your own ends.”

Harsh. If he was the original Thomas, he probably wouldn’t be very happy hearing the King say these things. He’d have to just bite his tongue and take it though anyways, all things considered. Of course, he’s not the original Thomas... and from what he knows, even if the original owner of his body was ultimately manipulated and corrupted by the likes of Sol Godman... he *had* been little more than a waste of space by the end.

Thomas had a bit more pity for the original at this point, admittedly. Finding out that his entire life’s downwards trajectory had been engineered by the man he thought was his only friend in the world, all to produce the downfall of his family... well, it was obvious that the original Thomas never had a chance.

Especially not when it was clear that the neglect, judgment and overall attitude of his parents comparing him to his older brother had been what drove the original right into Sol’s arms in the first place.

In the end, the original Thomas Marlow’s story was a tragedy... but it didn’t change much regarding his lacking value to society by the end of his life.

“... And yet, you’ve shown an entirely different side of yourself since returning from that exile. In the short time you’ve been back, you’ve had a productive meeting with your family’s account manager, fought off an attempt at capture by your enemies, and paraded yourself through the streets as if you don’t have a care in the world or a hint of fear for those who would love to see you harmed.”

Thomas takes all of that in and can't help but quip back.

"It's only been a day and a half, Your Majesty. Plenty of time for it to all blow up in my face still, I'd say."

The King pauses and Thomas can see his foreign way of speaking has thrown even the finely aged monarch for a loop. He mouths the worlds 'blow up in my face' back to himself for a moment before the corner of his mouth turns up slightly in a sardonic smile.

"Hm. An apt turn of phrase. Yes... it just might at that. Which is precisely why I called for you now instead of later... because I do believe I might just have use of you, Thomas Marlow. Or rather... your Dark Elf Servant."

Thomas blinks and can't help but look to Seevi. Seevi arches a brow in response, clearly just as baffled as him. Finally, Thomas looks back to the elephant in the room... the young woman in the bed. To be fair, she's far from an elephant... in fact, she has an ethereal type of beauty to her as she lays there sleeping, her eyes closed.

However, a closer look shows just how sickly she must be. Her 'ethereal beauty' is more that she's almost been reduced to skin and bones. Any 'fullness' to her cheeks is just a mere trick of the light. In fact, she's quite gaunt and it's obvious that whatever plagues her... she's dying from it.

A sudden thought takes Thomas as he realizes why her current state feels strangely familiar to him. It reminds him most strongly of a certain Mayor he'd seen so many times over his initial months in this world, laid up in bed and slowly dying with nothing to be done about it.

But... there was no way. Right? There was simply no way that something that had befallen a man in the ass-end of nowhere simply because he had too big of a heart and not enough resources to protect himself... would also befall a member of the Royal Family in the heart of their power... right?

“Tell me, Dark Elf. Speak truthfully or it will not go well for you. Do you know how to treat for Advanced Rot Lung?”

No seriously... what?

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A/N: Thomas remembering Camilla saying nobody ever actually catches Rot Lung unless they're an idiot back at the start of this story: “wat.”

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!