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

A/N: Arriving at the Capital at long last!

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They get a nice view of the city before arriving at least thanks to the last hilltop the wagon crests. Looking down at the Capital, Thomas can't help but feel a strange sort of… anticipation. Honestly, he's a little surprised that he's not feeling more trepidatious, but after being on the road for two weeks, he's more than ready to arrive.

Every town they'd passed through had been a little bit larger than the last, and all were of course more populated than Last Hope, but nothing had really stood out to him as overly special about them. The Capital on the other hand… well, it was the biggest settlement he'd seen since arriving in this world, that was for sure.

From afar, it looked quite sprawling, albeit surrounded by a large stone wall. To one side was verdant green plains eventually extending into a much more normal looking forest than the Darkwoods… and to the other side, off in the distance and not quite up against the walls themselves, were the Rotlands.

The Rotlands had not dogged their journey every inch of the way. Eventually, the road they'd taken to the Capital had diverged from the edge of the Rotlands, which seemed to be held at bay with more of those glowing white lanterns that had replaced Last Hope's blue ones early on.

Still, the fact that the edge of the Rotlands was this close to the so-called heart of human civilization on this world was… worrying to say the least.

And it WAS the heart of human civilization, at least according to Camilla. While there were other species that the humans were aware of, more than just the Dark Elves in the Darkwoods, the Kingdom that they were in was apparently the only Human Kingdom around. Other areas held different races, like the High Elves, the Dwarves, and the Orcs to name a few.

This meant that the walled city before them really was humanity's largest population center on this world, barring some undiscovered human civilization on the other side of the planet or something. And to hear Camilla tell it, the Human Kingdom was more fragile than anyone would have preferred.

The Rotlands in particular were a relatively 'new' phenomenon, their existence measured in decades instead of centuries. That meant there were still people who remembered a time when the Rotlands weren't a threat, a time before humanity's livable land had been cut in half by the desolate wastes.

Within the Capital, Noble Houses had risen and fallen as a result of the Rotlands' rapid spread. Those with their lands in the heart of the now plagued territory had been left destitute. Those who could develop methods for keeping the Rotlands at bay and stopping its advance had become richer than one could possibly imagine.

According to Camilla, House Godman had a tangential claim to that particular bit of fame. They had been part of the merchant group who came up with the white light lanterns and spread their usage far and wide. Through that and their other financial victories, they and several of their merchant friends had earned Nobility from the Crown, a feat that was much rarer before the Rotlands came around.

But then to be fair, it was also apparently a lot rarer for Noble Houses to lose their titles before the Rotlands… but in the end, those without lands could not expect to continue calling themselves Lords and Ladies, now could they? Lord of what? Lady of who?

House Marlow, according to Camilla, was part of the old guard that had not suffered too much from the approach of the Rotlands because their own lands were on the opposite side of the Kingdom. They'd escaped the fate of many of their fellow nobles, while doing their part to assist where they could with those less fortunate to them.

Of course, in doing so… they'd made enemies among the new guard. Specifically, there were a few Noble Houses that had not lost their titles solely because of House Marlow's intercession with the Crown. Their lands, while cut in half by the Rotlands, had not been entirely subsumed by the desolate wastes. And so House Marlow had petitioned for them to be allowed to keep their Houses intact, albeit in a diminished capacity.

But this in turn had meant that some of House Godman's merchant friends did not get to become nobles themselves, as the Crown had no intention of adding to the Nobility and bloating it.

This, Camilla reckoned, could be what had caused House Godman to conspire against House Marlow and seek to bring about it's downfall. Or so she believed.

It was important for Thomas to remember that last bit. Everything he'd been told about the convoluted politics of the Capital had come from Camilla. And while he certainly trusted the red head to have his back in matters of fighting, Thomas also recognized that Camilla was… not always correct in her beliefs about 'The Way Things Were'.

Still, with him being an Otherworlder, Eloise having lived in Last Hope all her life, and Sevvi being a Dark Elf… Camilla really was their best source of information about the situation they were walking into. And even she readily admitted she had no idea how bad things would be, especially if House Marlow's Master Tome was destroyed.

So yes, Thomas should be feeling some amount of trepidation as their wagon finally rolls its way up to the Capital's large gates. But in the end, he can't bring himself to be too nervous… he's simply too ready for something new at this point.

Admittedly, that might have something to do with the clothes he's wearing. Once they started reaching other towns, he'd set aside his leather armor and put back on the clothes of the original Thomas Marlow. Noble Clothing was… simply not something he was comfortable with yet.

Maybe his Gift would eventually let him adapt, but fuck if he didn't wish he could be wearing his leather armor made from the hide of the King of the Forest. That had felt like a second skin by the time they'd left Last Hope and now he felt naked without it.

"Halt!"

Alas, he didn't have a choice. After all, it wasn't just about hiding his true strength… it was also about presenting the proper façade. As one of the guardsmen calls out with a raised hand, Camilla brings the wagon to a halt and Thomas rises to his feet, fixing the gate guard with a superior look of disdain.

"Yes? Is there a problem?"

There's a pause as the gate guard takes in his appearance, from the fancy clothing to the prideful sneer. Then, the man glances to the side where a long line of commoners and other people trying to get into the city are watching the interaction.

Camilla had explained that this would probably be a whole thing too. Obviously, as nobility, Thomas could not be expected to wait in line. However, his lack of a proper carriage would almost certainly raise eyebrows. But also, waiting in the commoners' line would ALSO raise eyebrows, so in the end… this was what they'd chosen to go with.

"Ah… your name, milord?"

Straightening up and squaring his shoulders, Thomas goes for his best imperious gaze. He's told it's pretty good at this point, but then to be fair he *has* been practicing. And whenever Thomas practices, he gets very good at things very quickly.

"Lord Thomas Marlow of House Marlow."

The gate guard's eyes widen at that and he takes in Thomas' appearance again, followed by glancing to a glaring Camilla and even looking over Eloise and Sevvi. His eyes fix on Sevvi's dark, long, knife-like ears for a moment before another voice suddenly calls out.

"Oi! What's the hold up here?"

Another gate guard, this one with fancier armor than the first, walks out with a frown on his face. He's clearly the superior in this case, likely the Captain of the Gate that Camilla had told him about. The first guard tears his eyes off of Sevvi and turns to speak in a low voice to his Captain, who in turn sweeps his own gaze over Thomas and his girls.

The Gate Captain's eyes widen at whatever his guardsman is saying… probably at being told who Thomas is. It's becoming incredibly obvious to Thomas that whatever happened to House Marlow, whatever House Godman did… it was public enough for these men to know about it. Because they clearly weren't expecting him and have no clue what to do with him.

"… Do you have any proof you are who you say you are, Lord Marlow?"

This, they'd also discussed beforehand. Thank god too, because it wasn't like the original Thomas had left him with a signet ring or anything like Sol Godman had. But he did have one thing in his corner… or rather, one person.

"Excuse me?!"

Camilla rises from her seat at the front of the wagon, her armor shining slightly from the fresh wax they'd applied to it the night before. Her hand falls to the pommel of her sword as she glares down at the Gate Captain with even more disdain than Thomas had shown the original guard.

"I am Dame Camilla Ackinworth, Knight Bachelorette of the Order of Saints! Lord Thomas Marlow is my charge… questioning his identity is the same as questioning mine! Are you questioning I am who I say I am?!"

The Guard Captain rears back as if struck.

"N-No, of course not Dame Ackinworth. It's just that-!"

"Then you will let us pass. Immediately!"

It’s a bit of a Hail Mary in Thomas’ opinion, but Camilla had assured him that even if she herself wasn’t a big shot, leaning on her knightly title and order should be enough to get them through the gate… along with his fancy noble clothing and pompous attitude, of course.

And to her credit…

“V-Very well! Yes! Let the Lord through!”

With that, they’re waved on through, wagon and all. Thomas sits back down as Camilla does the same, keeping his back ramrod straight and his gaze as imperious as ever. He makes eye contact with a few of the commoners waiting in the other line to be inspected before entering the city… and every last one of them looks away the moment he does.

Internally, that makes Thomas wince… he has no desire to make people fear him or anything like that. But in this case, it was better to be respected than to be doubted, even if that respect came from fear. They had enough enemies without letting gate guards walk all over them, after all.

That said… the city itself is noisy. As soon as they’re past the walls and making their way down the Capital’s main road, Thomas is buffeted by noise from all directions. His eyes dart too and fro, taking in the amount of life they’re surrounded by. The Capital is big and crowded and while Earth had definitely had bigger and more crowded modern cities, Thomas had never lived in any of them.

Those places were also definitely cleaner than this one too… the smell hadn’t been too bad outside of the walls but now that they’re inside Thomas finds himself rapidly regretting his enhanced senses, his eyes watering a bit as they go along.

Fortunately, they aren't staying in this section of the city. Their ultimate destination, of course, is the Capital's 'High District' where all of the Noble Houses' mansions and estates can be found. The city itself is built on a bit of a hill, meaning that the name of the High District is quite literal, putting it actually above most of the rest of the city.

Thomas has never considered himself particularly pretentious or anything like that. He'd done plenty of shitty jobs, sometimes literally, back in Last Hope. But he's never been happier to have been 'born' into Nobility in this world then when they finally turn onto the winding road that takes them all the way up into the High District.

As soon as their elevation no longer matches the rest of the city, the smell fades a fair amount. Not entirely of course, but it becomes muted all the same, something Thomas can treat as just more 'background noise' as he instead focuses on their increasingly opulent surroundings.

The vibrant plant life, the flowers, the ornate architecture and gilded halls… yeah, this is definitely a Nobles' City District, that much is for sure.

Which makes it all the more jarring when they get past all of the gorgeously built mansions and finally arrive at what should be one of the biggest and oldest estates of them all… to find nothing but ruin.

Where House Marlow's mansion and grounds once stood is nothing but ash and soot. The entire place has been burnt to the ground, not a single structure left standing, not even a tree remaining upright on the entire property.

Admittedly, he'd thought himself prepared for something akin to this when Camilla explained what the destruction of her communication tome likely meant for House Marlow's Master Tome. After all, between the Master

Tome presumably being destroyed and Sol's words about it being 'too late' for House Marlow, it was clear something had been planned.

But this was still far beyond what Thomas had been expecting. There wasn't anything left. What the hell had happened here? Had *anyone* survived?

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A/N: Dun dun duuuuun!

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!