

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

A/N: Moving right along!

-x-X-x-

Before Thomas knows it, three weeks have passed since he found himself waking up in a new world and arriving in the town of Last Hope. Honestly, he'd been expecting the time to move slower, to feel a bit like molasses. After all, he was someone from the Digital Age, the land of shorter and shorter attention spans brought on by the proliferation of tech and amplification of that ephemeral and otherworldly thing known as 'online content'.

Back on Earth, he hadn't been able to go an hour without checking his phone for something. He'd flitted between youtube videos and television shows and social media without a care in the world. And he most certainly hadn't had much patience for most movies either, preferring only the ones that were the most action packed and punchy, the ones with a gag a second that could really hold his attention.

Going from having something like the worldwide web at his fingertips to literally nothing but his predecessor's journal and the people around him SHOULD have been all but impossible for Thomas to cope with. And yet... there's something to be said about keeping so busy that you don't have time to think about what you're missing. There's something to be said about being so tired by the end of the day that you don't even notice the lumps in your mattress anymore when you collapse into bed at night.

So far, that had proven to be Thomas' saving grace. As the days went on, he'd endeavored to make it clear to both Eloise and the rest of Last Hope that he wasn't just here to stay... he was here to help. All he wanted was to be put to work, and while there were certainly plenty of people who questioned that at first, his actions inevitably spoke louder than any misconceptions floating around about him.

Eloise started him out running errands for her all over town, and once word spread that he was taking orders from the Mayor's Daughter as well as looking for more things to do... people started hesitantly putting out their own requests for help and offers of labor for him to partake in.

In completing their tasks and helping out around town, Thomas slowly but surely came to know more and more about Last Hope. It stopped being just some small town sandwiched between the decaying Rotlands and dusky Darkwoods and became something more than that for him. Not to be too cheesy, but really... it was its people, and Thomas had gotten to know some of those people quite well over the past three weeks.

For instance, he quickly learned that Last Hope's population was only around a hundred strong and currently had just three dedicated vocations in it other than farmer. There was a Blacksmith, there was a Tanner, and there was an Apothecary. Everything else that one might have built a shop or storefront around seemed to be dealt with by households or communal work.

Carpentry, for instance, was something that the town all came together for. When a house needed to be built, they worked together to get it built. When a house wound up empty with nobody coming in to fill it, they worked together to pull it down and put the resources to use elsewhere. Things like Tailoring and Cooking were also often handled by the individual households more often than not.

And then there were the farms. With the Rotlands on one side and the Darkwoods on the other, the amount of farmland surrounding Last Hope was rather limited, but far from nonexistent. Admittedly, seeing as there was no river nearby, Thomas had questioned where the water to support it came from at first. After all, he may not know much, but he knew enough to know that didn't make sense.

However, he'd quickly learned that there was a well in town that was apparently magically enchanted to always produce pure water. Meanwhile, the Gift of Farming that every farm had an overabundance of amidst its population provided the rest of the needed moisture to keep crops growing.

At the same time though, there was no Church or Chapel to be found anywhere in the small town. From what Thomas had been able to pick up through conversation, the Kingdom he found himself in didn't actually have an organized religion to speak up. Truth be told, that had been surprising to him for two big reasons.

First, Dame Camilla had introduced herself as a 'Knight Bachelorette of the Order of Saints'. If they had the concept of 'Saints' in this world, then didn't that stand to reason they should have some sort of religion for Saints to receive their Sainthood? Or was he simply being narrowminded?

Second though was even stranger... the very concept of Gifts themselves. Everyone had them, as Thomas had eventually found out. Each and every person was born with a Gift that not only made them better at that particular thing but also could be improved by them working hard in that particular thing.

But here was the kicker... if everyone knew they were called Gifts, why was nobody questioning the obvious? Who was giving them these gifts in the first place? If not some God or Powerful Entity who might as well be a God, then what was their source?

This topic was obviously of great interest to Thomas, because getting to the bottom of the esoteric, divine, and supernatural in this world might just be the key to finding out why HE suddenly woke up here in this body out of nowhere.

Alas, even asking people who actually seemed to like him, such as Eloise, Thomas hadn't been able to get a satisfying answer. It just wasn't something that anyone in this world, or at least in Last Hope, seemed to think about very much. Maybe there were great thinkers at institutions elsewhere in the world, but the denizens of Last Hope were far more interested in the day to day of keeping the town afloat than they were in that sort of thing.

Speaking of people who liked him... Thomas was happy to say he had a lot more people on his side than not at this point. In fact, his one and only detractor remained Dame Camilla herself. Everyone else in town was really starting to

come around to him despite his noble origins giving them pause. He'd done work for practically all of them by now, from the farmers on the outskirts to Beatrice the Blacksmith to Lahn the Tanner to even Arnold the Apothecary.

Though on that last one, Apothecary Arnold was constantly bemoaning the fact that all of the best ingredients for potions could be found deeper in the Darkwoods than was actually safe to venture. While the aging Apothecary could procure some of his potion ingredients from the Darkwoods edge (and did) he was constantly going on about the days when he was younger and more spry and therefore able to slip in and out of the Darkwoods without risking his life.

Thomas was half tempted to offer to do an expedition himself for the man, but so far he'd held his tongue for one simple reason... he didn't think he was ready yet.

See, everyone thought he was just a selfless, weirdo of a nobleman who threw himself into serving all of them in every way he possibly could out of some sort of noblesse oblige. The truth though was that Thomas wasn't selfless at all. He was incredibly selfish and every single thing he'd done since arriving in this world had been in service to himself first and foremost.

And it was working. That was the best part. Three weeks in and the results were tangible. He was faster, stronger, and tougher than he'd been when he arrived. Any midriff pudge that his new body had was gone now. He was filling out, broadening in the shoulders and chest, and gaining more muscle and definition than he'd ever had even in his previous life.

And it was all happening unnaturally fast, that much Thomas was sure of. There was just no way you were supposed to already have the beginnings of a six pack after only three weeks of work. Especially when that work was backbreaking labor rather than an actual exercise regimen planned out in detail by an exclusive personal trainer.

He was effectively managing to get the same results as Hollywood Action Stars did without any of the guidance they relied upon to achieve their results and in an even shorter amount of time than they could expect. All because of his Gift.

The Gift of Relentless Potential had turned out to be exactly what it said on the tin. As long as he didn't give up, as long as he kept pushing, then Thomas could turn any amount of hard labor and grueling work into absolute gains. Even when he injured himself, he could expect the injury to heal abnormally fast if he kept pushing through. That was how ridiculous it was.

There was just one problem... for all the work he'd done and the gains he made these past three weeks, Thomas still didn't have a single lick of combat experience. And from what he'd heard of the Darkwoods, going in without being ready for a fight would be akin to assisted suicide.

Goblins and Dire Wolves and Giant Spiders were just some of the things he'd heard about from talking with the townsfolk of Last Hope in the past three weeks. And those were just the things that sometimes came creeping out of the Darkwoods, forcing the townsfolk to rally together and destroy them as quickly as possible.

The harder they came down on anything that came from the Darkwoods, the longer they could expect to go without another attack, apparently. Thomas still hadn't seen such an attack himself yet, but he knew it was only a matter of time based on what he'd been told.

... Just as he knew it was only a matter of time before he would need to start learning to fight if he wanted to grow that part of himself as well. All of the hard work he'd been putting in... that gave him a foundation sure. He was at least twice as strong and fast and tough as he'd been when he started three weeks ago, and that sort of progress was nothing to scoff at. But actually fighting things or even other people was very different from getting strong and tough due to back-breaking labor.

Unfortunately... none of the town's natives were actually capable of giving him that kind of training. Sure, they came together to fight off attacks from the Darkwoods, but that didn't mean any of them were accomplished warriors or secret retired knights with martial backstories. It was more just strength in numbers, with everyone that had a Gift suited for making them tougher pitching

in to help out with literal pitchforks and blacksmith hammers and a handful of hunting bows here and there.

They could rally to protect their town, but none of them were so dedicated to fighting that they could give him the training that he needed. In fact, the only one with a martial-focused Gift in the entire town... was Dame Camilla.

Apparently, the Gift of Swordsmanship was pretty rare. Not that Gifts had an actual rarity system as far as Thomas had been told, but there still wasn't a single person in the entire population of Last Hope who had the same Gift as Camilla... or indeed any other kind of weapons-based Gift from what he'd heard. Nor did any of them have something as esoteric and unique as his Gift either.

The rarest Gift around before his and Camilla's arrival had been Eloise's father, who despite not being nobility, did indeed have the much lauded Gift of Leadership that Thomas himself was supposed to have. Given Gifts were apparently inherited from family much of the time, he did wonder briefly how Mayor Harper had gotten it... but the man was barely ever coherent these days, let alone cognizant of his surroundings enough to answer questions about his lineage.

Regardless, this left Thomas in a bit of a bind... because Camilla was unknowingly gatekeeping him from growing stronger, from becoming the unstoppable and unrelenting warrior he wanted to become.

Sure, he could grab a stick and start swinging it around at random to try and teach himself how to fight or something, but even Thomas knew that wasn't likely to help very much. He needed combat experience and his two options seemed to be either risking his life by running into the Darkwoods with a sharp stick... or asking Camilla to train him.

Of course, he already knew exactly what she would-

RIIIIIIIING! RIIIIIIING!

Thomas blinks, torn out of his thoughts as the town bell starts to ring. He knows what that means, even if he hasn't heard it until now. It means there's an attack from the Darkwoods, just like he'd been pondering mere minutes ago.

Setting down his current load, a pair of buckets full of water he's been carrying back from the well all this time, Thomas hurries over to the edge of the town's border with the Darkwoods. Other able-bodied folk are also showing up there rapidly enough, and tools that can be used as makeshift weapons are being handed out.

The threat, Thomas soon learns, is goblins... and as he stares at the small green creatures currently building up a presence at the edge of the forest line, he can't help but swallow nervously. There's at least two dozen of the damn things already, but while they're half the size of the average human, they look far nastier and... evil for lack of a better word. There's a maliciousness to them that has Thomas shivering just a tad even though he knows he should be stronger than them.

A sickle is passed his way and he wraps his hand around the handle hard enough that his knuckles whiten. A dozen or so townsfolk have assembled by this point, and some are even shouting and waving their makeshift weaponry at the goblins to try and scare them off.

But from the hungry look in those beady black eyes the enemy is sporting, Thomas doesn't think it's going to work. Which means there's going to be a fight. To be fair, this was what he wanted, wasn't it? He wanted combat experience. Well, nothing quite like getting it hands on, now was there?

"Step aside."

Only, just as that thought is crossing his mind, an imperious feminine voice cuts through the clamor. Dame Camilla does not shout. She does not yell, despite the townsfolk shouting and yelling at the goblins. However, her voice is such that they all shut up and turn to her anyways, her tone commanding an audience like nothing else.

Seeing the armored knight standing there with her sword drawn, the townsfolk are quick to clear a path for her. So is Thomas, to be honest. As she passes him by, Camilla shoots him a curious look, not a hint of disdain in her gaze for once. And then the moment is gone and she moves along, stepping away from the edge of the town and into the no man's land between them and the Darkwoods.

Seeing a single woman, even armed and armored, presenting herself for the slaughter... riles the goblins up something fierce. They shriek and howl and a moment later charge forward, waving their clubs and makeshift knives in the air as they descend upon Camilla in a group frenzy.

It IS a slaughter to be fair... just not a slaughter in their favor. What follows can only really be described as a thoroughly one-sided massacre as the goblins' numbers prove meaningless in the face of Dame Camilla's skill.

Her blade flashes through the air, cutting not just one at a time, but multiple goblins at once with every single slash. She slices and dices them up without mercy, without hesitation, and with an alacrity that causes Thomas to stare right alongside the gathered townsfolk.

Barely half a minute has passed before it's over and she's done. At which point, Camilla wipes her sword on the dirtied cloth of a goblin corpse and sheathes it, turning back to town with an almost bored look on her face.

"It's done. The threat is dealt with."

And as she leaves them all staring after her with wide eyes and open mouths, Thomas is forced to agree. The threat was indeed dealt with. And at this point, he doesn't think he has any choice... he needs to get the woman who seems to hate him most to train him to do the things she just did. As soon as fucking possible.

-x-X-x-

A/N: Hm, how is Thomas going to convince Camilla to train him?

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!