

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

A/N: Back to town!

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All was well that ended well... after a fashion. Frankly, given the Dire Wolf had been half his size, getting away with just a cut on the palm and some bruises was extremely lucky. That he hadn't broken a bone or two when the monster took him to the ground and that his spear hadn't gotten splintered in the beast's powerful jaws seemed like pure providence more than anything else.

Arnold was certainly happy to see them come back in one piece, and he was positively over the moon when he saw everything that Thomas had brought back with them in the satchel. Apparently, it was more ingredients than the Apothecary had had available to him in many, many months... even years, really.

Their hard work had earned Thomas a rejuvenating potion for his hand, one that would see the cut on his palm healed by the next morning. Which was good, because Thomas truly did expect Camilla to run him ragged when they finally started combat training.

Ultimately, setting aside the near brush with death, Thomas feels really good about his and Camilla's trip into the Darkwoods. She'd had every chance to not only kill him, but also to just let him die without even having to get her hands dirty... and she hadn't taken it. Instead, she'd saved his life and agreed to train him.

Could it be that Thomas was finally getting through to the woman? Could it be that he might actually be able to turn his last hater in all of Last Hope into a fan?

Heh, he wasn't getting his hopes up that much. Frankly, Thomas would just settle for Camilla tolerating him. Especially so long as she was willing to train him in how to fight, because that right there... that was the missing piece. His

fight with the Dire Wolf had proved that he would soon have the strength to struggle against such monsters if he just kept working hard, but that strength would ultimately be meaningless at worst and unfocused at best if he couldn't back it up with some sort of fighting skill.

And so, the next morning Thomas goes with Camilla to the outskirts of town just as she'd ordered and finds himself once more standing there with his blunted training spear, ready to begin learning how to fight.

Camilla, for her part, stands across from him with her arms across her chest, staring him down as if he's a particularly impossible puzzle that she hasn't quite managed to figure out yet. Better than the disdain from before though at least.

"... Why did you choose the spear, exactly? You knew you wanted me to train you, but instead of having the Blacksmith make you a sword, you had her craft you a spear. Why?"

Blinking at the question, Thomas shrugs his shoulders.

"Well... I don't exactly have the Gift of Swordsmanship, do I? Correct me if I'm wrong Dame Camilla, but from what I understand, the spear is simpler to wield than the sword, and therefore easier to learn. So since I can't lean on a Gift, I figured I would lean on the simple and easy instead."

There's a pause as Camilla processes this, before finally tilting her head in acceptance.

"A more adequate response than I was anticipating."

Thomas can't help his inquisitive mind in the face of such a reply.

"... What did you think I was going to say?"

Camilla stares at him blankly for a long moment only to finally shrug.

"I assumed you were simply over-compensating for something, Young Lord."

Thomas' jaw drops open. Was that a joke? Was the Knight Bachelorette *teasing* him? Except... Camilla gives nothing away. If she IS making a joke at his expense, her Poker Face is seriously out of this world. In the end, he closes his mouth and clicks his tongue, deciding not to dignify that with a response. Instead, he slaps both palms down onto his training spear, pleased to feel only a small twinge of pain from the palm that had been injured a day before.

"Alright... I'm ready to learn. Where do we begin?"

In response, Camilla crosses her arms over her chest and nods.

"Stab me."

There's a pregnant pause as her words hang in the air. Then, Thomas blinks and furrows his brow.

"Pardon?"

Arching her own brow right back, Camilla gestures to herself.

"The pointy end of your weapon, or rather the metal end since you're wielding the blunt one... stab me with it. Try to, anyways."

That was... that was it? No advice regarding footwork? No 'correct way to hold his weapon'? Nothing except... stab her?

Thomas works his jaw for a moment, wanting to ask more questions... but he can tell from the look in her eye that Camilla would not be pleased if he did so. And considering he literally had to risk life and limb just to get this much from the red head, Thomas figured he should probably at least try to get with the program before calling out what seemed like bullshit.

So, holding his spear aloft, Thomas hesitantly moves forward. Once he gets closer though, he does drop the hesitation, knowing full well that there's no

world in which he's going to hurt Camilla with the blunted training spear. So really... he has to give it his all.

Setting his feet in what he believes to be a solid stance and lining up what feels like a proper thrust, Thomas half-lunges forward, aiming the metal end of his training spear right at Camilla's gut for an easy 'impalement'.

She, of course, vanishes before the blunt metal of the spear can reach within even an inch of her body. Then, she's at his side before he can even blink... and her hand is hitting him almost contemptuously in the back of his head, using his own momentum against him to send him sprawling forward into the dirt.

Thomas yelps from both the slap to the head and the fall as he goes down in a tangle of limbs. But he also hops back up again as fast as he can make his body move, half-expecting her to follow up with some sort of 'kick him while he's down' hardass bullshit if he doesn't.

Camilla hasn't moved again though from where she stopped, watching him with lidded eyes as the corner of her mouth twitches ever so slightly.

"Again."

In response, the corner of one of Thomas' eyes twitch right back. Was she... really just using this as a chance to beat him up? This didn't feel like training at all. This felt like the sort of bullshit you would see in some Young Adult Novel, where the main character was put through the wringer by their 'mentor', but in reality they shouldn't have learned anything because the 'teaching methods' on display were utter bullshit.

... Then again, Thomas had his own bullshit didn't he? Maybe Camilla was just a shit teacher. Maybe she had never trained anyone in her life and didn't know where to start. Or maybe she was actively trying to get him to quit. It didn't really matter though, did it?

Whether she was actually training him to fight... or just acting as an overpowered sparring partner, the results should be the same for him in the end,

right? So long as he had the Gift of Relentless Potential, so long as he continued to strive, continued to try... then no obstacle could get in his way.

Thomas lunges forward again, letting out a shout as he aims to strike her with his spear. Camilla dodges once more, not even using her sword as she easily avoids his blow while delivering another of her own that's enough to send him sprawling again.

But Thomas just gets back up... and keeps going. He gets knocked down, over and over again... but he always gets back up. He gets knocked down. He gets back up again. He gets knocked down. He gets back up again.

Slowly, the upward corner twitch on Camilla's mouth and the mirth dancing in her eyes that she thinks he can't see starts to disappear, replaced by intrigue and consternation once more. As Thomas keeps going, as he fights through the pain from repeatedly being smacked into the ground, as he ignores the soreness that each fall leaves him with, Camilla even starts to frown.

All the while, he can feel it sort of working. The progress is barely noticeable. Almost indiscernible from no progress at all, one might say. And yet, he thinks he senses it... the way his movements begin a bit surer. The way his feet seem to shift ever so slightly into a better stance. His hold on his spear feels just a tiny bit more confident with every new thrust, like maybe he's figuring it out.

... Or it's entirely possible his brain is playing tricks on him, but Thomas happily and consciously ignores that possibility because thanks to his Gift, he has to keep moving forward, he has to keep trying... since that's the only way he'll keep growing.

Finally, he lunges for Camilla, trying to 'stab' her with his spear, and this time when she dodges him she doesn't smack him down into the dirt for it. Instead, she moves a bit further back, holding up a hand and calling for a stop.

Thomas does as he's 'told', slowing down and panting heavily as he uses the spear for support. Sweat pours off of his body and the makeshift leather armor

he's wearing clings to him like a second skin. And yet, he can't help but feel rather accomplished, especially with the baffled look Camilla gives him.

"... What drives you, Lord Thomas? What makes you get back up again and again no matter how many times I slam you into the ground?"

His brain goes somewhere unexpected in that moment. And before he can think better of it, the words are leaving his lips even as said lips curl into a savage sort of grin.

"I get knocked down... but I get up again. You're never gonna keep me down, Dame."

It's a joke that only makes sense to him, but Thomas nevertheless is laughing internally even as Camilla looks more baffled than ever before. She stares at him in flagrant disbelief for a long moment before huffing and shaking her head.

"We're done for the day. We'll reconvene again tomorrow morning though. Understood?"

Blinking, Thomas glances up at the sky. Judging by the position of the sun, which he's spent the past three weeks getting better at reading, they've actually been going at it for over an hour by this point. It felt both shorter and longer, truth be told.

Still, Thomas just nods.

"Understood. Thank you for your tutelage, Dame Camilla."

He offers a bow to her, provoking another surprised look. While it's extremely tempting to ask her more pointed questions, such as 'have you ever actually trained anyone before?', Thomas knows better. In the end, whatever this had been, it had at least been fruitful... and frankly, that was all Thomas needed.

With training concluded and pleasantries observed, Thomas leaves Camilla behind and limps back into the village. He's still extremely sore from hitting the

dirt so many times in the span of an hour, but he doesn't let it get to him... and in fact, as he pushes through the discomfort and pain, making it back to the Mayor's House and putting away his armor and spear, the soreness begins to fade.

So long as he keeps moving forward, such basic and minor injuries have no hold on him, that's something Thomas already knew from three weeks of hard labor.

Speaking of which... he only stops by the kitchen to get some more food to refuel before heading out again. After all, just because he's training with Camilla now doesn't mean he's going to stop the rest of it. Sparring with an unstoppable juggernaut of a swordswoman like the Dame is one thing... but he still has to keep working out if he wants to have the strength and stamina to withstand said sparring.

Fortunately, Thomas has a magical Gift propelling him onward... and the promise of eternal gains to keep him motivated in a way he never could be back on Earth.

With a pep in his step and a smile on his face, he makes his way towards the closest place likely to have chores for him... the Blacksmith. Once he's done there, he'll head over to the Tannery and then ask around the farms to see if there's anymore work that needs doing.

He'll finish his day at the Apothecary, just in case Arnold worked faster than he'd thought he would. The old man had told Thomas that it would be a few days before the potions he'd wanted were ready... and Thomas had to admit, he was chomping at the bit on that front.

Still, once those potions were ready... well, Thomas would be adding a new bit of work to his routine. And another way of getting stronger as well.

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As she watches him depart, Camilla doesn't quite know what to think about how their first 'session' had gone. The truth is, she has no experience teaching anyone anything... her own training as a squire had been constantly on the move, going from place to place and fighting monsters and defending innocents.

Sparring sessions like the one that she'd just done with the Young Lord were perfectly normal, though she had to admit that the first time she'd sent him sprawling into the dirt, Camilla had wondered briefly if she needed to dial it back a bit.

The only problem with that was, he'd gotten right back up and gone for another round like it was nothing. And then he'd kept doing so, over and over again for a full hour, until she'd worried he might honestly hurt himself if they continued.

Where did that tenacity come from? What was his sudden resolve and determination born of? It honestly stirred something within her breast, seeing him continue to strive despite the rough treatment.

The truth was, Camilla didn't know the first thing about teaching someone to fight. But... today's session had gone rather well, hadn't it? So... she'd just keep doing more of the same. Either the Young Lord would give up... or maybe he'd learn something.

And in the meantime, she would continue to pretend like she hadn't missed a prime opportunity to fulfill her not-orders out in the Darkwoods yesterday. Really, Lady Marlow had said to wait a few months anyways, so it wasn't as though she'd disobeyed... even if with every passing day Camilla was less and less certain she **WOULD** be able to obey, when the time finally did come...

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A/N: Camilla is certainly feeling conflicted...

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!

