

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

A/N: Thomas knows he has to do this right!

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Even as he resolves to ask that Camilla train him, Thomas still doesn't go to her immediately. Not because he's nervous or scared... even if really, he's both of those things, but because he's not ready. After all, there's not much point in asking for combat training from the female knight if he's not properly equipped for combat.

Fortunately, the inroads that Thomas has made with both Beatrice and Lahn, Last Hope's Blacksmith and Tanner, mean that he can get exactly what he needs. Neither of them are an actual leatherworker, but between the two of them, they're able to create a makeshift set of leather armor for him anyways. It's more akin to what he remembers biker leathers being like in his original world, but hey, that's better than nothing.

As for the weapon... Thomas briefly considers having Beatrice make him a sword like Camilla wields. Or rather, a pair of swords, one blunted and perfect for training and the other for actual fighting. However, he ultimately decides otherwise, vaguely remembering conventional wisdom from Earth that said swords weren't actually all they were cracked up to be and that for your average foot soldier, the spear was the way to go because it was a lot easier to learn and handle.

And considering Thomas didn't have the Gift of Swordsmanship that Camilla had, he figured whatever weapon he did wind up trying to learn should be as easy as possible. He could always graduate to more advanced stuff once his Gift of Relentless Potential made him a Master at Spear Fighting, Thomas figured.

It also helped that making spears was a hell of a lot easier than making swords, the sort of thing where all Beatrice really needed was a pair of wooden poles to

affix pointy metal on the end of. Or rather, pointy in the case of one... Thomas had still had Beatrice make him a blunted one for training purposes.

The other one though was definitely sharp enough to punch holes in some goblins... and hopefully anything else that might come crawling out of the Darkwoods to threaten Last Hope.

That, ultimately, was the reasoning Thomas had landed on for how he was going to persuade Camilla to offer him a hand and train him up. Sure, she'd handled the goblin raid with relative ease and shocking aplomb, but surely two fighters was better than one, right?

And so, three days after the goblins had come out of the Darkwoods, Thomas found himself making his way over to the edge of town where Camilla regularly went to train each day. Wearing the leather armor that Beatrice and Lahn had put together for him and wielding the blunted training spear, he approaches Camilla openly, without any subterfuge.

When she sees him approaching, the Lady Knight does a double take, her red hair whipping back as she jerks her head in his direction after passing him over with a dismissive glance at first. Eyes narrowing in confusion and disdain, Camilla stops her motions and straightens up as Thomas approaches her.

"... What are you wearing?"

Looking down at himself, Thomas shrugs and thumps his leather 'chestplate'.

"Armor."

To be fair, the difference between their leather armor IS night and day. Camilla's looks like it's been crafted by an artisanal leatherworker, someone who makes that sort of thing for a living. By comparison, Thomas' 'armor' looks like it was cobbled together by the Blacksmith and Tanner of a very small, rural farming town out in the boonies of civilization. Which it was.

Finally, her eyes glance to his 'spear'.

“... And what are you holding?”

She sounds more amused than disdainful in that moment. Progress, perhaps? Hoisting it up, Thomas offers a crooked grin.

“A spear. A blunted training spear to be exact. Beatrice made me a much sharper one as well, but I left that back in my room. No point in risking poking my eye out with the thing before I need it, right?”

Camilla frowns consideringly for a long moment before letting out a huff of air.

“What do you want from me, Young Lord? What is the meaning of this?”

Right. Time to try and sell it. Straightening up and squaring his shoulders, Thomas smiles radiantly.

“I should think that obvious, Dame Camilla. I want you to train me to fight.”

“No.”

Her answer is as immediate and negative as Thomas had expected it to be honest. That she would dismiss him out of hand was inevitable... it was why he hadn't asked her before now. Well, that and the possibility that the old Thomas Marlow was right and Camilla really was sent here to kill him. But... he'd be operating under the belief that that wasn't the case, at least for now.

Still, Thomas refuses to back down.

“Now hold on a second. At least hear me out. Besides, didn't you say it yourself back in the carriage all those weeks ago? You said that my commands would be followed within reason so long as they did not run counter to any commands from my mother and father. Are you saying that my parents explicitly forbade you from training me to fight?”

When she stays silent for a long moment, he knows instantly that he has her there. It was a gamble of course, but not much of one. If this body's parents did have the foresight to order Camilla not to train him, then he'd be screwed either way. However, the fact that they didn't... well that gave him an opening, didn't it?

"Even if you command me to train you, I am still inclined to say no. I do not intend to give you the strength or power to terrorize the gentlefolk of this town."

Thomas can't help but bristle a little at that. After everything he'd done these past three weeks, she still thought him capable of such a thing?

"Excuse you! I have terrorized and harmed no one since arriving here! All I have done so far is help out! Ask anyone in Last Hope and they'll sing my praises!"

Camilla smirks.

"Yes. I have watched you run around building good will with the townsfolk, Young Lord."

What?

"Do you think me as dim as them? Do you think I do not see you for what you really are? Your behavior was strange to me at first, I must admit. I didn't understand why you were acting so... subservient. But I see through you now. I see that you are craftier than I gave you credit for."

Letting out a humorless laugh, Camilla tosses her hair back.

"I suppose I should at least applaud you for dropping the memory loss act finally. That was embarrassing to watch. But now that you're finding your footing, you're digging in aren't you? Just like you always do. The parasite of House Marlow."

Thomas stands there, mouth open and wide eyed at the accusation she's levied his way. The unfortunate part is that she's not entirely wrong. The people of Last Hope think that he's helping them out of the kindness of his heart. Dame Camilla

seems to think he's helping them in order to get on all of their good sides so he can manipulate them into doing what he wants.

Neither is entirely true... neither is entirely false. It's not an 'either or' situation, to be fair. Thomas is doing the things he's doing because he benefits from them yes, but not because he's necessarily trying to make the town love him for some nefarious and underhanded purpose. It's just win-win for him to run around doing hard labor and chores day in and day out, because ultimately he grows from those things in ways no one else does.

Being called a parasite definitely raises his hackles though. Gritting his teeth, he shakes his head.

"I am no parasite, Dame Camilla. I want you to train me specifically so that I am not freeloading off of these good people! I want to be able to protect them, to defend them from the threats coming out of the Darkwoods, just like you did three days ago!"

Of course, Dame Camilla's 'knowing' smile makes it clear she doesn't believe him for a second.

"That's an even worse excuse than the first, Young Lord. I am more than enough to deal with anything that comes poking its way out of the Darkwoods. So long as I am here, this town will be just fine. Training you to fight alongside me would be... overkill."

Thomas narrows his eyes.

"You can't know that though. We don't know how dangerous the Darkwoods really are, do we? Even the people here in town aren't so sure that there won't come a day when something capable of wiping them off the map comes lumbering out from those trees!"

Camilla just arches a brow, unconvinced. Scowling, Thomas continues on.

“And besides, who’s to say you will even be here forever? What if the family recalls you back to the Capital after a certain amount of time, leaving me here alone? What then, huh?!”

That one actually gives Camilla pause, her face going carefully blank as she ponders his words for a moment. Finally, she shakes her head.

“That will not happen. So long as you are here in Last Hope, so shall I be. A member of House Marlow must have a knightly escort.”

Is he being paranoid for reading between the lines and hearing the unspoken ‘alive’ that would go before ‘member’ in that statement? If he dies... then she could return to the Capital, her duty done. It would be simple enough, wouldn’t it?

Then again, her refusal to train him seems to give truth to the matter of whether she’d been sent here to eventually become his executioner. After all, it would be so easy for her to ‘accidentally’ kill him during a sparring session if she were to take him on. So the fact that she’s categorically refusing does seem to imply he’s safe from her blade.

And yet... that’s still not good enough. Thomas needs more. He needs to become stronger, faster, and tougher... but he also needs combat training and he can’t get that running around Last Hope doing errands for people. He needs actual, proper training with an actual warrior.

... He’s been holding it in reserve, but he thinks he just might have to bring out the big guns. Thomas didn’t want to go this far, but with Camilla refusing to budge... maybe this will convince her.

“If you train me up to your standards, I can help Last Hope beyond simply protecting it from the Darkwoods. I can help protect it from the Rotlands as well.”

Camilla pauses, her brow furrowing in consternation.

“What are you talking about?”

Huffing, Thomas plants his training spear in the ground, looking to the side with a grimace that is only partially feigned. When he looks back... he's serious as the grave.

"Do you remember back when we were first introduced to Eloise's father? How you put your foot in your mouth talking about how someone could only contract Rot Lung by 'ignoring the obvious symptoms and refusing to seek proper help'?"

Camilla flushes, scowling at his description of events.

"Ignoring your strange parlance, yes I recall."

Thomas smiles thinly.

"Do you not wonder why Mayor Harper has Rot Lung? The answer might seem simple... he got it from doing the maintenance on all of the border lanterns that keep the Rotlands from encroaching on Last Hope and swallowing it and its farms hole. But that's only part of the story, isn't it? He almost certainly noticed the symptoms... he should have sought 'proper help'."

Gritting her teeth, Camilla's nostrils flare.

"Get to the point, Young Lord."

Testy. But of course, Thomas doesn't say that out loud. He simply smiles.

"The truth is, the Apothecary here in Last Hope is getting older... too old in fact. What would have been simple ingredients to gather in his youth are too difficult for him to procure now... because they're deeper in the depths of the Darkwoods than is safe for a man his age to progress. He has no apprentice, so Last Hope has had to do without certain critical potions for years now... and Mayor Harper, in all of his selflessness, made sure that others got the preventive potions to hold back Rot Lung first, even as he got sicker and sicker."

Spreading his arms wide, Thomas shrugs.

"I need to be able to fight so that I can go into the Darkwoods to collect the ingredients that Apothecary Arnold needs, Camilla. Ingredients that will let him make potions that will keep a tragic tale like Mayor Harper from being repeated right before our very eyes... and keep this town from being swallowed up one way or another, be it by the Rotlands or the Darkwoods. THAT is why I need to be trained."

He doesn't bother saying anything about saving Mayor Harper himself... Thomas already knows that's a lost cause from talking with Eloise. At this point in time, the potions that the Apothecary can make for town are only good for keeping Rot Lung from manifesting, they can't actually cure the magical disease once it sets in.

Still, with Harper in bed, Eloise has taken over her father's duties... ALL of her father's duties. Meaning that nice young woman is out there every other day or so, checking the magical lanterns and subjecting herself to the effects of the Rotlands whenever she finds one malfunctioning and has to spend time fixing it.

If it wasn't her, it would be someone else... and if those potion ingredients aren't gathered, it will eventually be someone else regardless once she ultimately succumbs just like her father.

Thomas isn't going to let that happen... but he can't exactly go into the Darkwoods as he is now.

"Prove it."

Wait, what? He blinks as Camilla suddenly sheathes her sword and steps towards him.

"Excuse me?"

"You've just tried to sell me a sob story about how you want to learn to fight specifically so you can range into the Darkwoods. So it's time to prove you're not full of hot air, Young Lord. We're going to go to the Apothecary together and get

a list of the ingredients he needs as well as their locations. And then you and I will go into the Darkwoods together to retrieve them.”

When he doesn't immediately agree, Camilla arches a brow.

“Unless you'd like to admit that you were lying and are too much of a coward to enter the Darkwoods even with me at your back.”

Funny... because its not the Darkwoods that has Thomas afraid. Its having Camilla at his back.

Then again... does he really have any better options?

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A/N: Reminder that this story updates Mondays through Fridays, so we'll be back after a short weekend break!

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!