

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

A/N: A new normal~

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When he sees the opening, Thomas hesitates... but only for the smallest fraction of a second. In the end, he knows he can't just ignore something like that... Camilla is more than skilled enough to realize what he's doing. And so instead he lunges forward, sweeps Camilla's guard wide open, and punches the blunt end of his halberd into the red head's chest.

She goes flying back, landing on the ground with a groan. Thomas expects her to hop right back up, but instead she just stays there for a moment, staring up at the bright blue sky overhead. He begins to get worried, his brow furrowing as he starts forward.

"... Camilla? You alright?"

But the female knight simply lifts a hand up into the air, halting his movement.

"I'm fine. Just... give me a second."

Then, from off to the side...

"She's simply coming to terms with her own inadequacy, Lord Thomas."

Thomas lets out a sigh as he looks over to where Sevinarya has just walked up on them. He arches a brow at the Dark Elf, unimpressed with her verbal sniping.

"Eloise already let you go, huh?"

Sevinarya shrugs.

“I have completed the tasks that she set for me, yes. Until she comes up with more busy work, I thought I might come and see if you wanted a sparring partner closer to your level.”

Camilla pushes herself up to her feet, growling at that. Thomas holds up a hand to keep the female knight at bay... mostly because there's an unfortunate kernel of truth to Sevinarya's words. Not that he appreciated the Dark Elf continuing to make these little sniping comments regarding Camilla's skill level... however, she wasn't entirely wrong when she said things like this.

The truth was... Thomas had surpassed his sworn knight. Completely and utterly. In just the handful of months he'd been in this world, he'd passed Camilla up in every possible way. He was faster, stronger, and tougher than she was... and to give her credit, she was pretty damn tough.

Frankly, it was a testament to her loyalty that she had yet to question him on it. Or so Thomas figured. He knew if he were in Camilla's shoes that he would have some serious questions at this point. Like how the hell he'd become this good this quickly and where was any sign of him having the Gift of Leadership he was supposed to have?

No, instead it was the Gift of Relentless Potential that had kept him advancing far faster than he should have though. Using first Camilla's 'training' and then the numerous challenges of the Darkwoods as his whetstones, Thomas had accelerated his growth as much as he possibly could.

In the weeks during which he'd been desperately hunting down the nonexistent Spider-Queen to try and save Eloise's father, he'd been even more pressured to excel and grow... and that had ultimately left Camilla in the dust.

Meanwhile, Sevinarya was not being arrogant when she said she was better than Camilla. Thomas had allowed the two to spar when it became clear she wouldn't just stop looking down on the other woman and... Sevinarya had handed Camilla her ass.

In terms of pure martial prowess, the Dark Elf simply had Camilla dead to rights.

That didn't mean Sevinarya wasn't pulling her weight or obeying his initial edicts, however. Thomas kept expecting the former Princess to slip up or show her unwillingness to make up for her crimes against Last Hope... but at every corner, she had instead followed Eloise's commands perfectly. She'd taken to completing even the most undesirable, grungiest of tasks that the feisty brunette could throw her way without complaint and without issue.

And whenever Camilla had reason to take charge of their new Dark Elf servant, she'd followed Camilla's orders without question too, doing whatever the female knight told her to with nary a complaint. Even Camilla was forced to grudgingly acknowledge that Sevinarya was obedient. She was just also extremely opinionated and more than a little bit of a bitch.

Ah... but Thomas had an idea of how to solve that!

"You alone aren't good enough to press me, Sevinarya."

His words make the haughty Ex-Princess stiffen a little in outrage, but Thomas just smirks at her and arches a brow. He's all but daring her to disagree with him. After all, while her shadow magic DID give her a bit of a leg up in their first few spars since she'd joined the town, Thomas had quickly found himself adapting to her tricks... and without her tricks, he was still faster and stronger than her as well.

He'd won their last few spars, even if there was no denying that she was better than Camilla. And yet...

"You two will come at me together. And let me be clear, by 'together' I mean I want you to work together. Camilla is in charge. Sevinarya, you are to support her however she requires in order to take me down. Camilla... use her however you need to in order to win."

Both women look the exact opposite of thrilled by his orders. And yet... Thomas isn't joking. He gives his halberd a bit of a flourishing twirl and then sets his

stance and gives them both a distinct look. One that says quite clearly 'Well? I'm waiting!'

After a beat, the two of them move to get closer to one another, facing him from a distance even as Camilla thins her lips and lifts her sword. At the same time, Sevinarya pulls out her curved daggers, her red eyes considering him and his stance carefully.

She's not wearing her mask anymore... she hasn't since they captured and saved her life, in fact. As such, Thomas is easily able to read her words on her lips, even if they barely move.

'Your orders, Mistress?'

Camilla's nostrils flare in a huff before she answers, just as quietly.

'Anything I say to you, he will know it. He can read lips. Just... follow my lead and provide me with openings where possible. Understood?'

'... Hn. Understood.'

Thomas continues to smile blandly, waiting for them to come at him together. The two split up after their short little strategy session and he watches in amusement as Sevinarya circles around one side while Camilla moves around the other.

Heh, interesting. Thomas had figured they would need a couple of losses before they actually started working together. That was how it always worked in fiction, after all. And yet... he can feel it in the air. A thrumming tension that lets him know that they're actually taking him as well as their team-up seriously right off the bat.

But then... both Camilla and Sevinarya seem to be rather competitive. So Thomas can't be too surprised that they would set aside their differences for a chance to beat him.

Finally, Camilla in front of him and Sevinarya at his back, the two settle into place... and strike a moment later. Thomas finds himself immediately on the back foot as the two-on-one begins in earnest, having to desperately defend from both Camilla's blade and Sevinarya's daggers.

Look, he can definitely beat either one of them pretty decisively. Camilla, he beats a hundred percent of the time at this point. Sevinarya, he wins more times than he loses and has been winning more and more of their one-on-ones in recent days.

However... facing the two extremely driven female fighters together at the same time is an entirely different beast. It's like nothing he's had to do yet. The goblin tribe, the King of the Forest, the Spider-Queen... not a single one of those experiences prepares him for two intelligent, extremely skilled fighters coming at him with everything they've got.

He manages to sweep Sevinarya's legs out from under her, but that turns out to be a trap. Before he can follow up, Camilla hits him in the small of his back, a stunning blow that Sevinarya then capitalizes on to tangle her legs with his and bring him down.

In an instant, Thomas is on his back, Sevinarya's curved daggers at his neck and his groin while Camilla is pointing her sword at his face. Then, her eyes dart down and widen upon seeing Sevinarya's weapon placement and she squawks in a bit of a panic.

"Where do you think you're pointing that thing?!"

Sevinarya just blinks owlshly.

"... A cut along the thigh is fatal in most cases. Do you not know that?"

Camilla scowls, going as red as her hair. Thomas, meanwhile... just laughs. His laughter seems to signal an end to the tense, threatening moment, as both Sevinarya and Camilla pull their blades back and let him rise from the ground.

Once he and Sevinarya are both back on their feet, the Dark Elf can't help smirking a bit.

"I suppose you're not quite ready to handle the two of us at the same time, Lord Thomas."

Thomas smirks right back, even as he rolls his shoulders and moves from foot to foot, keeping himself nice and loose.

"On the contrary... it's perfect."

Sevinarya looks baffled by this, while Camilla just sighs. Chuckling, Thomas picks his halberd back up and explains.

"You two together ARE out of my league, don't get me wrong... but that's exactly what I need. I do my best work under pressure. I grow when I have an insurmountable obstacle in my path. So... let's go again. I think from now on, I'll be sparring against you both together a lot more."

Sevinarya glances to Camilla at this, but one look at the female knight's long suffering expression tells the Dark Elf that he's not joking. Understanding seems to dawn in the former Princess' red eyes as she looks back at him with a contemplative expression.

For a second, Thomas thinks that she might actually ask the question he's been expecting someone to ask for a long time now. Namely, what the fuck is up with him? He knows they must be wondering at this point. Sure, Camilla has sworn an oath and probably doesn't consider it within her purview to know his secrets. Meanwhile, Eloise is too grateful for all he's done with her to wonder how he's done it.

And then there's Sevinarya. She'd clearly found him intriguing based on just how long she'd been spying on him by way of Eloise. And the fact that she'd stepped in and helped him end his fight with the King of the Forest made it clear she wanted to know more rather than letting him die there.

But... now much like Camilla and Eloise, Sevinarya doesn't seem to consider it her place to question him. In the end, she simply shuts her mouth and bows her head before twirling her curved daggers and preparing for another round.

As Camilla does the same, Thomas just smiles softly, readying himself to once again meet their combined power in battle.

It's only a matter of time though... eventually, someone is going to ask about his Gift.

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“Lord Marlow, may we speak? It's about your Gift...”

Hours later, Thomas steps into the Mayor's House feeling every bruise that losing repeatedly to Camilla and Sevinarya has left him with. But honestly, he quite likes how it leaves him feeling. Bruised... but satisfied.

Of course, the moment he steps inside, Mayor Harper himself calls out from the house's living room. Thomas blinks, both caught off guard and having to fight back a rueful smile as the man unknowingly proves him to be a prophet. Regardless, he ambles over all the same.

“Mayor Harper. You're looking well today.”

It's been a month since the man was cured of Rot Lung. A month since Sevinarya had shown up in the man's office dying from the mother of all spider bites. A month since all of her people had been turned into egg sacs and she'd broken down in front of him, ultimately swearing her loyalty to him.

In that time, Mayor Harper has improved in leaps and bounds. There are still some lasting effects, but he's gotten much, much better. The man has even taken on some of his old duties, though from what Thomas knows, the Mayor and Eloise are still sharing the role of town leader somewhat. Or at least, Eloise is closer to a 'Vice Mayor' rather than an assistant at this point, if they were putting labels on things.

“That’s kind of you to say my lord. Please, sit with me if it’s no trouble.”

Thomas hums and nods, sitting down across from the Mayor. This was who Mayor Harper was, he’d discovered. A man who spoke with authority... but also a certain deference, especially where Thomas was concerned. When it came to Thomas, Mayor Harper would ask for things but never demand them. And yet, it was always just easier to do whatever the older man asked.

Thomas suspected this was the Gift of Leadership at play. Admittedly, he’d never actually seen anyone with the Gift of Leadership before... he was supposed to have it himself on account of being a member of House Marlow, but arriving in this world, he’d been assigned his own bullshit broken Gift instead.

“You said you wished to speak about my Gift?”

Was Eloise’s father finally going to be the one to break the façade they were all operating under? Was the Mayor going to be the one who finally asked Thomas what was going on with him? The man certainly has a serious look on his face as he gazes into Thomas’ eyes.

“Yes. You are... of House Marlow. You are also a nobleman. As I understand it, you should have the Gift of Leadership.”

Thomas smiles and inclines his head.

“So I’ve been told.”

A bit too on the nose? Maybe. But frankly, at this point he’s wondering if it might be time to come clean a bit more. This past month has been fairly nice... but the remaining secrets he’s keeping from those closest to him do weigh on him just a little bit. If Mayor Harper demands answers, Thomas might just give him some of them and then ask the older man for advice on how to tell the others.

“... I’m worried that you’ve been letting your Gift atrophy in favor of other pursuits, Lord Marlow. I understand that you did not want to lead Last Hope

when you first arrived and perhaps now that I'm no longer on my deathbed you think you can continue to ignore your duties... but your Gift of Leadership will never grow if you do not nurture it. You must find ways to take on responsibilities, even if you do not wish to lead an entire town."

Thomas slowly blinks. His mouth isn't hanging open, but only because he's making a conscious effort not to look like an idiot trying to catch flies. And yet, as the Mayor's words wash over him, he honestly can't believe his ears. Finally though, he carefully tilts his head to the side.

"... Are you offering your help in that regard, Mayor Harper?"

The Mayor nods decisively.

"I am."

After a long moment, Thomas slowly nods back.

"I'd be happy for your tutelage then, sir."

After all, it wasn't like he was going to pass up on an opportunity like this. He'd already proven that his Gift of Relentless Potential helped him learn everything from alchemy to cooking to any and every possible skill under the sun. So why not leadership as well?

... Seriously though? Not even Mayor Harper was willing to question what was clearly so strange about him? Was there nobody in this town who wondered exactly what was going on with his Gift?!

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A/N: Hehe.

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!

